

**Multivalent Masculinities in the Northern Irish Post-Conflict  
Novel**

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter One:</b> Troubling Masculinities: The Traumatized Masculine in Sean O'Reilly's <i>Love and Sleep: A Romance</i> and <i>The Swing of Things</i> .....	<b>26</b>
1. <i>Love and Sleep: A Romance</i> as Trauma Fiction .....	30
2. Alcohol and Sexuality in <i>Love and Sleep: A Romance</i> .....	46
3. Trauma, Community and Masculinity .....	57
4. Masculinity and Betrayal in <i>The Swing of Things</i> .....	62
<b>Chapter Two:</b> Queering Masculinities: Locating and Locuting the Other in the Northern Irish Post-Conflict <i>Bildungsroman</i> .....	<b>82</b>
1. Queering the <i>Bildungsroman</i> and the Coming-Out Novel.....	86
2. Queering Sexuality, the Radical Potential of Pluralism .....	104
3. Queering Masculinities: Locating and Locuting the Masculine "Other" .....	123
<b>Chapter Three:</b> Fathering Masculinities: Like Father, Like Son? Transgenerational Trauma and Intergenerational Masculinities in David Park's <i>Swallowing the Sun</i> and <i>The Light of Amsterdam</i> .....	<b>143</b>
1. Transgenerational Trauma Theory as Literary Praxis .....	149
2.i Narrative Structures in <i>Swallowing the Sun</i> .....	153
2. ii. Narrative Structures in <i>The Light of Amsterdam</i> .....	160
3.i Transgenerational Trauma and The Father Wound Martin and <i>Swallowing the Sun</i> .....	164
3. ii. Alan and <i>The Light of Amsterdam</i> .....	175
4.i Martin and Tom: Transgenerational Trauma in <i>Swallowing the Sun</i> .....	182
4.ii. Alan and Jack Transgenerational Trauma in <i>The Light of Amsterdam</i> .....	191
<b>Chapter Four:</b> Ageing Masculinities: Not Just 'A Young Man's Game'— Gendering Gerontology in <i>Midwinter Break</i> and <i>The Truth Commissioner</i> .....	<b>203</b>
1. Embodying Ageing Masculinities.....	208
2. Ageing Masculinity: Sexuality and Intimacy.....	226
3. Ageing Masculine Identity: Generativity and Stagnancy in Work, Parenthood and Relationships.....	235
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>261</b>
<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>270</b>

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My fourth chapter, "Ageing Masculinities: Not Just 'A Young Man's Game'— Gendering Gerontology in *Midwinter Break* and *The Truth Commissioner*" expands upon research pertaining to "generativity," "stagnancy" and paternity undertaken during my MA. Some of this research was previously submitted as part of my final MA Thesis, "The Palliative and Punitive Effects of Paternity on Constructing Masculine Identities in David Park's *The Truth Commissioner*". However, these ideas have been developed further and reframed and expanded upon within the specific context of ageing masculinities.

## **Abstract**

This thesis contends that the post-conflict Northern Irish novel depicts and establishes increasingly diverse and progressive models of masculinity. Utilising a chronothematic approach I analyse how the portrayal of masculinities in these novels, published over the past twenty years, progresses from the violent hegemonic models of the past towards the inclusive and alternative masculinities more representative of contemporary, post-conflict society.

The first chapter analyses two of Sean O'Reilly's novels set pre-and post-Good Friday Agreement. I argue that these novels are early examples of trauma fiction which illustrate the devastating effects of trauma, and the traumatising effect of hegemonic masculinity, on masculine construction. Furthermore, I contend that the lack of alternative expressions of masculinity emasculates the protagonists, who in an attempt to compensate, increasingly emulate the violent hegemonic masculinities from which they feel disenfranchised.

In order to interrogate alternatives to the heteronormative discourse on masculinity, in the second chapter I examine representations of "queer" masculinity in novels published over the past two decades. I also consider the relationship between the Irish *bildungsroman* tradition and its relationship to the coming-out novel. Moreover I establish that while the depiction of sexuality has become more dynamic and fluid, the representations of masculinity in these novels are problematically similar.

In the third chapter I utilise a unique approach to transgenerational trauma theory as a hermeneutic to analyse father-son relationships in two of David Park's novels. I posit that the generational conflict between father and son, or the "father wound", is an inherently masculine trauma that may be passed transgenerationally and is exacerbated by the impact of the Troubles.

Finally, I examine the depiction of ageing masculinities as important embodiments of masculinity that serve to destabilise a hegemonic script that reinforces the power and relevance of young to middle-aged men. By emphasising the plurality of ageing men, I seek to queer the spectrum of masculinity as well the depictions of how older men from the province come to terms with their pasts to renegotiate masculinities in the present.

## Abbreviations

<i>Love and Sleep: A Romance</i> .....	<i>Love and Sleep</i>
<i>The Swing of Things</i> .....	<i>TSOT</i>
<i>Sons of Ulster: Masculinities in the Contemporary Northern Irish Novel</i> .....	<i>SOU</i>
<i>A Son Called Gabriel</i> .....	<i>ASCG</i>
<i>The Good Son</i> .....	<i>TGS</i>
<i>Swallowing the Sun</i> .....	<i>STS</i>
<i>The Light of Amsterdam</i> .....	<i>TLOA</i>
<i>Gods and Angels</i> .....	<i>G&amp;A</i>
<i>The Truth Commissioner</i> .....	<i>TTC</i>
Good Friday Agreement .....	<i>GFA</i>
<i>Trauma Explorations in Memory</i> .....	<i>TEM</i>
<i>Reflections of a Rock Lobster</i> .....	<i>ROARL</i>
“That Which Does not Respect Borders” .....	“Borders”
“Hegemonic Masculinity Rethinking the Concept” .....	“Hegemonic Masculinity Rethinking”

## Introduction: Multivalent Masculinities in the Northern Irish Post-Conflict Novel

... all the things I need to say course uncontrollably through my being, rising  
and falling on an overwhelming tide of love, but no matter how hard I try,  
none can breach the sewn seam of my mouth.

David Park, "The Strong Silent Type," *Gods and Angels*

Una Brankin in the *Belfast Telegraph* refers to David Park's short story collection *Gods and Angels* as a "men's eye view on life." Park has noted in the same interview that the stories in his collection are an attempt "to explore and illuminate aspects of masculinity" (Brankin) and describes the male protagonist in one of them as "a conduit for the voices of others" (*G&A* 119). Park himself is a conduit, as he writes about and expounds upon contemporary issues of Northern Irish masculinity. He has commented that "men find it more difficult to share what's inside and they feel the need to conform to stereotype and many don't have a network of support. It's a generalisation, but it can be a problem. They don't have enough trust to open up about themselves" (Brankin).

Gender is a contentious issue in the increasingly dichotomised popular and populist discourse of Western identity politics. Outside the academic context, emotionally-charged phrases such as "male privilege" and "toxic masculinity" abound, which further polemicise current gender discourse rather than constructively facilitating it. This is a phenomenon of which Park is certainly aware, as he illustrates in his story "Two Bloggers," wherein a feminist Twitter user and her ex-husband host competing blogs about male and female issues. Blogger 'Suffragette City' to the protagonist, enumerates issues "fired up with what seemed to me to be an incendiary level of anger against the male patriarchy that rules the world and seeks to keep women tethered in passive submission" (*G&A* 108). For his part, Spartacus, who runs the competing blog on men's issues, is depicted as more concerned with "counting the steeply rising number of hits" than the validity of the issues raised on his blog. Here Park dramatises how the

current discourse on gender is polemical and increasingly represents gender as a zero-sum game. He ends the story by suggesting that such discourses, whether “Real or imagined ... play themselves out on the ether and in the ether everything exists in some parallel world that isn’t life no matter how much it thinks it is, or wants to be, and so doesn’t signify very much at all” (*G&A* 128). However, while this would be ideal, it is arguably untrue. Regardless of whether opinions expressed on the internet drive or reflect the myriad current issues in identity politics, the discourse on masculinity in particular is becoming increasingly politicised on both social and academic levels.

This thesis argues that the post-conflict Northern Irish novel both iterates and inculcates increasingly plural and positive models of masculinity, delineating a distinct move away from the violent hegemonic models of the past. The novels analysed present potentially ameliorative models of masculinity that reflect a more diverse contemporary, post-conflict Northern Irish society. I begin this study by examining Sean O’Reilly’s *Love and Sleep: A Romance* (2002) and *The Swing of Things* (2004), then in the second chapter I consider Jarlath Gregory’s *Snapshots* (2001), Damian McNicholl’s *A Son Called Gabriel* (2004) and Paul McVeigh’s Polari Prize-winning *The Good Son* (2016). Analysing the impact of fatherhood on masculine construction, in chapter three I compare and contrast two novels by David Park, *Swallowing the Sun* (2005) with *The Light of Amsterdam* (2012). Finally, I examine ageing masculinities in David Park’s novel *The Truth Commissioner* (2008) in comparison to Bernard MacLaverty’s recently published *Midwinter Break* (2017).

In order to demonstrate how literary fiction produced by Northern Irish writers during the past twenty years constitutes a pluralist, progressive representation of masculinities indicative of a changed and changing society, I implement a chronothematic approach to the texts under

discussion. Employing a chronothematic approach is the best way to illustrate the trajectory and evolution of the depictions of masculinity in the Northern Irish post-conflict novel and how congruent themes and issues have continued to develop from early post-conflict novels into twenty-first-century literature.

Research into literary representations of masculinity is exceptionally important given that masculinity studies itself is a relatively nascent scholarly field. Nearly seventy years on, feminism is iteratively on its “fourth wave” while masculinity studies, largely coming to prominence in the nineteen nineties, lags behind. While the theoretical development of masculinity studies follows a similar trajectory to feminist theory, there are areas in which omissions of scholarly attention have caused this trajectory to become truncated. Indeed, as Harland and Ashe have iterated, there have been junctures where “Feminism's core analytical focus on femininity resulted in the equation of gender analysis with studies of women” (747). For true gender equality to exist, academic study of gender cannot afford to be myopic; however, these omissions also represent unique opportunities to examine and contribute to a dynamic and continually evolving discourse of gender and masculinity, particularly from a post-conflict perspective.

In an academic environment demanding more from the humanities, namely proof of impact, real discernible relevance and the potential to change today’s society, research into this work is crucial. The potential of masculinity theory to effect tangible change goes beyond literary analysis and gives us an insight into how masculinities are constructed as part of our social reality. David Park remarks that, “It's always dangerous to make generalisations about gender, but some men feel a disconnect between what's really inside and what socialisation



expects them to feel. Young males are seriously over-represented in suicide rates - the statistics are shocking” (Brankin). Nowhere is this more evident than in contemporary Northern Ireland.

Literature does not exist in a vacuum and while in this thesis I examine literary depictions of Northern Irish masculinity it is imperative to remember that these stories reflect the lives of our fathers, our brothers and our partners and the trauma and challenges they too have encountered. Ulster University and the Northern Ireland Centre for Trauma and Transformation (NICTT) report that Northern Ireland has “the world’s highest recorded rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), ahead of war-hit regions such as Israel and Lebanon” (“NI Has World's Highest Rate of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”). While to some extent this is an understandable impact of the legacy of the “Troubles,” suicide rates have also increased by 90% *since* the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 1998 (Tomlinson 473). Moreover, research has shown that men are four times more likely than women to commit suicide (Tomlinson 474). While “toxic masculinity,” or rather the debilitating expectations of hegemonic masculinity, are part of the problem, so too is the lack of discourse on alternative, positive models of masculinity that already exist in post-conflict Northern Irish literature. Literature is not just a reflection of the social practices and performances that constitute gender; it plays an integral role in the construction and discussion of those masculinities. As Alex Hobbs contends, literary masculinity theory allows the reader “to consider the more private realms in which masculine identity may be formed and performed; and to isolate and examine positive examples of male protagonists who do not conform to masculine stereotypes” (390). My research critically engages with and deconstructs the depiction of these masculinities, interrogating how they contribute to this dynamic and reciprocal relationship.

Masculinity theory has continued to evolve over the past decades, from its “broad strokes beginnings” to placing specific emphasis on race, class and sexuality (Hobbs 389). Coming to particular prominence in the 1990’s, masculinity theory, like all gender theory at that time, was heavily influenced by the work of post-structuralist gender theorist Judith Butler. Thus, masculinity theory is almost ubiquitously predicated upon the idea that gender is performative, and thus socially, rather than biologically, constructed. Similarly founded upon the socially constructed nature of gender, R.W. Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity is widely accepted as “the most influential theory in the field of men and masculinities” (Wedgewood 329). Adapting the Gramscian formulation of cultural hegemony into their theory of masculinities, Connell hierarchically positions hegemonic masculinity as the “culturally dominant” form or expression of masculinity to which all other constructions are subordinate (Wedgewood 331). This culturally dominant form of masculinity is, in the West, more often than not reflective of the traditional, stereotypical masculine traits which Connell explains are “typically defined by a specific body-reflexive practice: sport, violence, heterosexual performance, bodybuilding” (*The Men and the Boys* 86).

Although these expressions of masculinity are often presented as the current cultural ideal, they are not necessarily ‘normal’ in the lived experiences of men. As Connell explicates, “Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative” (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). Indeed, the normative traits propounded by hegemonic masculinity may have a negative impact on those subordinate masculinities that constitute much of men’s lived experience. Analysing literature via the lens of masculinity theory allows us to extricate, and exculpate, alternative models of masculinity. As Hobbs articulates, “the discourse not only celebrates alternatives to

hegemonic exemplars but also exposes the ways in which men are harmed by patriarchal ideals too” (Hobbs 393).

It is crucial to note that there is no one static, monolithic expression of hegemonic masculinity; hegemonic masculinity is as plural and dynamic as the socio-cultural environment in which it is constructed. Jane McGaughey summarises that masculinities, including hegemonic masculinities, are “plural, fluid and historically informed by ideologies of a specific time, place and social context” (12). This leads to one of the more potentially optimistic aspects of hegemonic masculinity: that by its nature as socially constructed it may also be reconstructed. What this means is that in a society undergoing a process of fundamental change, such as post-conflict Northern Ireland, “there could be a struggle for hegemony, and older forms of masculinity might be displaced by new ones” (Connell and Messerschmidt 833). The time is now ripe for an investigation into the literary representations of the hegemonic shift in a post-conflict society such as Northern Ireland. As Marianne Hirsch argues, “Post-conflict societies present a unique and underanalysed site of examination for masculinities” (105).

In order to prove my thesis, I utilise an integrative and intersectional approach to masculinities, incorporating literary psychoanalysis, queer theory and gerontology to elucidate the nuances in multivalent constructions of Northern Irish masculinities. This represents a return to R.W. Connell’s holistic conceptualisation of masculinities, expounding on those undertheorised areas in order to provide original, insightful examinations of Northern Irish masculinities. Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity, while still the default theory of masculinities, has come under criticism in recent years. Some theorists such as Demetriou have criticised Connell’s formulation for being socially determinist, “suggesting that it tends to overdetermine gender practices” (269). Similar criticisms contend that the concept of multiple

masculinities “tends to produce a static typology that essentialises the character of men” (Connell and Messerschmidt 836). Connell has noted the numerous arguments that the “concept of hegemonic masculinity reduces, in practice, to a reification of power or toxicity” (839).

Connell specifically addresses these concerns in a paper co-written with Messerschmidt entitled “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept” (*Gender & Society* 19.6). To the accusation of essentialism, Connell replies that the research has shown numerous socially constructed masculinities that prove that “masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals” (836). Indeed, Connell goes to some lengths to establish that the mutually reciprocal relationship between “the body and the social is two-way and simultaneous and how practice itself forms and is formed by the structures within which bodies are appropriated and defined” (*Masculinities* 61). However, while Connell denies that hegemonic masculinity theory is essentialist or reified, they do accept that “the criticism of trait models of gender and rigid typologies is sound” (829). It is necessary, in order to obviate this tendency in my own work, to focus on the plural nature of masculinities rather than enumerate these masculinities as over-defined categories measured by levels of complicity. Nikki Wedgewood iterates the integral aspects of Connell’s formulation that are often overlooked or undertheorised by other critics as “the crucial influence of psychoanalysis and subsequent use of the life history case study method; the importance of non-hegemonic forms of masculinity; and the concept of cathexis” (332). This thesis adopts a cognate approach in analysing literary representations of masculinities. Paralleling Connell’s, it is a composite of similar elements, amalgamating the psychological approach with a socio-cultural deconstruction of masculine embodiment and finally the impact of sexuality in masculine construction.

There is an inherent intersection between gender and psychology, as Wedgewood articulates, “Central to the grounding of the theory Connell develops in *Masculinities* and the deep insights into gender relations and gender construction is the use of life history case studies informed by psychoanalysis” (334). Psychoanalysis is an important theoretical tool in the analysis of gender, being firmly rooted in psychology. Connell argues that “It was Freud more than anyone else who let the cat out of the bag. He disrupted the apparently natural object ‘masculinity’ and made an enquiry into its composition both possible, and, in a sense, necessary” (8). Wedgewood argues that psychology remains an underutilised yet crucial tool in the examination of masculinity, and the value of such an approach to a study of post-conflict masculinities is clear. I implement a unique psychoanalytic approach to masculinities by incorporating both Caruthian trauma and contemporary elements of transgenerational trauma theory to elucidate its impact on the construction of Northern Irish masculinities. This is of crucial importance in a post-conflict environment in which the psychological impact of the trauma of the Troubles on masculinities cannot be understated. This is in addition to the more traditionally applied psychoanalytic theory employed in Caroline Magennis’ *Sons of Ulster: Masculinities in the Contemporary Northern Irish Novel*, which, like this thesis, similarly utilises Lacan’s law of the father and Jung’s theory of individuation in examining these critical depictions of multivalent masculinities.

Connell’s inclusion of the life history approach to masculinities is also relevant to my discussion of Northern Irish masculinities. This methodology is defined as an exploration of “a person’s micro-historical (individual) experiences within a macro-historical (history of the time) framework” (Hagemaster 1122). This particular approach has been adopted by literary theorists to analyse the depiction of masculinities in their respective socio-cultural contexts. Connell’s aim

in the life history approach was to refine and define the theory of embodiment. Arguing that “bodies are both objects and agents of practice,” Connell’s work illustrates that “the relationship between the body and the social is two-way and simultaneous and how practice itself forms and is formed by the structures within which bodies are appropriated and defined” (61). Analysing the embodiment of masculinity is integral to this thesis, as literary theorists such as Alex Hobbs have decried the paucity of material investigating both the literal and socio-discursive aspects of male ageing, either during childhood or in old age. As Hobbs remarks in *Aging Masculinity in the American Novel*, “there is still one significant area where men’s studies is deficient: the impact of age on male experience” (389). To address this deficit of scholarly attention two of my chapters investigate the socio-cultural impact on masculinities in boyhood via the *bildungsroman* narrative and in old age through the counterpart narrative of the *reifungsroman*. As Hobbs notes, “While there have been studies concerned with female-authored literary portrayals of older women, there has not been a comparative study for male characters, written by men or women” (385). Erik Erikson’s foundational psycho-social theory of the life course is applied in an analysis of the depiction of ageing masculinity to elucidate how depicting plural, ageing masculinities enables progression from and alternatives to the hegemonic mode of masculinity. While it is important to consider agency in the examination of subordinated masculinities, Connell does admit that “the criticism of trait models of gender and rigid typologies is sound” (“Hegemonic Masculinity Rethinking” 829). This thesis accepts that agency and complicity are inherent to everyone in society and therefore does not categorise non-hegemonic masculinities based on levels of complicity. Rather it regards the power of all non-hegemonic expressions of masculinity as endlessly plural, with the power to deconstruct and destabilise negative aspects of the prevailing hegemonic masculinity.

Finally, the cathexis to which Connell refers is Freudian cathexis, which is part of object relations theory. It examines the libidinous expression of desire, desire that Connell specifically refers to “as emotional energy attached to an object” (*Masculinities* 74). There is a reciprocal relationship between the body and the social in the experience of gender and sexuality. As Connell explicates, “the social relations of gender are experienced in the body (as sexual arousals and turn-offs, as muscular tensions and posture, as comfort and discomfort) and are themselves constituted in bodily action (in sexuality, in sport, in labour, etc.)” (231). Thus, Connell’s formulation includes examinations of not only sexual desire, but “the practices that shape and realise desire” (74). This integral construction is incorporated into this thesis in the examination of the various depictions of male sexuality as contrary to the heteronormative, hegemonic ideal. For example, the first chapter examines the impact of violent sexualities and emasculation on the male psyche. The second chapter utilises queer theory in order to highlight men’s experiences as “other” subordinate masculinities. While the third chapter does not specifically focus on cathexis, the fourth chapter analyses depictions of ageing male sexuality both biologically and performatively as potentially positive and subversive to common contemporary depictions of older men as either impotent or inappropriately sexual. It does this by examining the sexuality at play in long term relationships, itself an under-analysed locus of academic literary study.

The history of Northern Ireland has been a difficult and contentious one, arguably culminating in the thirty years of ethnosectarian conflict euphemistically referred to as the “Troubles”. From its outbreak in 1969 to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, this period resulted in 3,600 deaths and over 50,000 injured (CAIN). The narrative of the Troubles has been predominantly male, as Harland and Ashe articulate, “Men's dominance of the political and military dimensions of the Northern Ireland conflict has meant that the story of the conflict has

generally been a story about men” (747). Much research has shown that men are more likely to be both the victims as well as the perpetrators of violence. Of the 3,600 deaths recorded more than 3,200 of those were male, ten times greater than female deaths.

Wider research into post-conflict societies has shown that “traditional gender dichotomies may be further entrenched and exacerbated during times of extreme violence and extended in the post-conflict phase” (Cahn and Ni Aolin 110). Rosemary Sales argues that due to this binarism “Women, and women’s concerns, have been largely invisible in the reports and in much of the literature generated by the Troubles” (1). This has been largely facilitated by the lack of female representation in traditionally male arenas such as politics which further reinforces patriarchal attitudes. In 2010, Magennis reflected on the lack of female politicians, marking those few extant representatives as “notable exceptions” to the norm (*SOU* 9). The peace process has to some extent changed this and is “celebrated for its inclusion of women, in particular the creation of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition, an all-woman party elected to the peace talks” (Claire Pierson *British Politics and Policy*). 2017 marked the first time that the proportion of female MLAs in Stormont equalled those in the House of Commons, albeit at only 30% (N.I Election Results. *The Independent*). Women have been involved at the community level of the Northern Ireland peace process, and research has shown women are more likely to be involved in the “grassroots networking and social support structures that are relied upon by local and international elites to embed peace processes” (Cahn 110). Sales criticises the lack of female representation on higher political levels and observes that “One of the ironies of the ‘peace process’ has been the absence of women - the ‘peace makers’ - from the negotiations” (1). While women’s contribution to the peace process must not be undermined nor understated one must be wary at all times of the tendency in post-conflict studies to essentialise gender differences as



dichotomous. As Bill Rolston comments of Northern Irish literature “Men came to represent violence and women peace with all the force of a Greek tragedy” (406). More work remains to be done on the active role women played in the conflict because, as Ni Aolain and Cahn have shown, “Women are frequently violent actors themselves in violent and conflicted societies, both in undertaking primary acts of violence and lending substantial support to men who carry out such actions” (103).

This is not to deny that in countries of conflict codes of masculinity tend to become more extreme and hypermasculine. Angela Harris defines hypermasculinity as “a masculinity in which the strictures against femininity and homosexuality are especially intense and in which physical strength and aggressiveness are paramount” (793). This is certainly true of Northern Ireland, which has valorised violent masculinities and emphasised “men’s roles as protectors and defenders” (Harland and Ashe 747). Indeed while the “hard man” trope was extant before the Troubles, it rose to hegemonic prominence within that period, as Magennis elaborates, “The mode of masculinity that has been most often presented as representative of Northern Ireland is that of paramilitary groups and their members, where masculinity is inextricably linked to violence and issues of national struggle” (*SOU* 7). This has changed, however, in the years since the peace process was established. Harland and Ashe note that while these hegemonic masculinities are “not responsible for the conflict,” I would contend that the dynamic shift in Western hegemonic masculinities towards more caring, positive and alternative masculinities has certainly facilitated its conclusion (747). The peace process both necessitated and facilitated “a transformation of masculinity: a switch from the formerly hegemonic retributive model of the ‘hard-man’ to a more sensible, restorative male subjectivity” (Lehner 65). This shift is similarly both reflected in and enabled by the multivalent representations of men in contemporary

Northern Irish post-conflict fiction. Thus, an examination of these literary depictions of the move to post-conflict masculinities may exemplify “the myriad of ways in which masculinities transform, adapt and reformulate in the post-conflict environment” (Hirsch 105).

Sociological research into post-conflict masculinities, and particularly Northern Irish post-conflict masculinities, is increasingly well represented in terms of academic research. Karen Lysaght and Robert Kitchener lead the way in pioneering sociological research into gender and sexualities in Belfast and beyond. Geraldine Meaney has published a considerable amount of work on masculinity and cultural theory, authoring *Gender Ireland and Cultural Change: Race Sex and Nation*. Alan Bairner has published a considerable amount of research into the role of masculinity and sports in Northern Ireland ("Sport, the Northern Ireland Peace Process, and the Politics of Identity") and Harland and Ashe continue to pave the way for psycho-social discourse about young men in post-conflict Northern Ireland (“Troubling Masculinities: Changing Patterns of Violent Masculinities in a Society Emerging from Political Conflict”). Yet much analysis of how masculinities are addressed in literature remains to be done. Some crucial work has been established in this field in the articles published by literary scholars such as Maeve Davey and Fiona McCann. McCann’s articles include a feminist critique of Sean O’Reilly’s novel *Gynandricity*, and a literary topographical examination of depiction of place in “The Post Past City’: Apocalyptic Cityscapes and Cultural Stagnation in the Fiction of Sean O Reilly” (*Irish Contemporary Landscapes in Literature and the Arts*). Maeve Davey also touches on gender in her discussion of O’Reilly’s novels in “A Strange Heart Beating: Bird Imagery, Masculinities and the Northern Irish Postcolonial Gothic” (*The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 5).

However, the only current text dedicated to the study of literary representations of Northern Irish masculinities remains Caroline Magennis’ 2010 *Sons of Ulster: Masculinities in*

*the Contemporary Northern Irish Novel*. Magennis' monograph examines the effect of the peace process on the depiction of masculinities in the Northern Irish novel by questioning "what the novel can tell us about hegemonic and non-hegemonic discourses of Northern Ireland [and masculinities] in the late 20th century" (*SOU* 18). This text focuses particularly on the work of Robert McLiam Wilson, Glen Patterson and Eoin MacNamee and their novels written and published between 1994 and 2004. Magennis' work is critical to any discussion of post-conflict and/or Northern Irish masculinities, crucially laying the foundation for current research. However, this work does have limitations which this thesis seeks to address.

Her focus on the novels published during the decades just before and immediately after the GFA of 1998 considers work that depicts only the most immediate impact of the transition in masculinities effected by the peace process. Therefore, one might argue that some of the theories utilised in such an analysis may be idealistically pre-emptive rather than genuinely indicative of change. For example, Magennis' utilisation of queer theory largely in relation to the novels of Robert McLiam Wilson, whose protagonists are unequivocally heterosexual, and with some reference to a bisexual character in Glen Patterson's *The International*, represents a missed opportunity. While Magennis acknowledges some novels have emerged that depict queer protagonists, she does not focus on these novels, instead arguing that Ulster has "a barely audible queer voice" (*SOU* 81). However, I contend that this is inaccurate even at the time of Magennis' writing. This chapter proves that there is in fact an increasingly vocal gay voice, emerging particularly post-millennium. Since the year 2001 there has in fact been a preponderance of novels written and published by queer men depicting queer protagonists; and I examine four such authors in this thesis, Jarlath Gregory, Damian McNicholl, Brian Kennedy and Paul McVeigh. Their works include Gregory's *Snapshots* (2001), McNicholl's *A Son Called Gabriel* (2004),

Kennedy's *The Arrival of Fergal Flynn* (2004) and *Roman Song* (2005), and McVeigh's novel *The Good Son* (2016).

Building on her important work, this thesis takes account of the proliferation of such fiction, the form in which it is presented and how the masculinities it depicts definitely reflect a transition from previous, heteronormative hegemonic masculinities. Moreover, some contextual remarks made at the time are now, nearly ten years later, less applicable. Magennis' claim that the Republic Of Ireland is essentially conservative, and that the state and church are interrelated to a large degree does not reflect today's reality. The Republic of Ireland's legalisation of gay marriage in 2015 and its most recent repeal in 2018 of the 8th Amendment that now allows legal abortion are two examples of this. Twenty years on from the Good Friday Agreement, my research is uniquely placed to allow for examination of how masculinities are represented in novels that are decidedly post-conflict and, by engaging with research and scholarly criticism that has been published since 2000, provides a more comprehensive and contemporary review and analysis of the literature.

Magennis is correct to assert that, "The novel is a site where ideologies of gender are produced and reproduced, therefore [it is] a key repository/expository of discursive, and therefore, visual practice" (*SOU* 34). This is especially relevant in a post-conflict Northern Irish context as "This fiction, grounded in real historical events, often makes the line between representation and verisimilitude blurred" (*SOU* 18). While many novels are certainly influenced by real events of the past, the extent to which they reflect actual events is often a point of contention. One of the most profound changes in the past ten years since Magennis' text was published has been the emergence of post-conflict literature as an increasingly recognised genre.

Precipitated in part by the emerging discourse on literary trauma theories and the establishment of the genre of trauma fiction, post-conflict studies constitutes an emergent and rapidly developing field of inquiry, particularly as it applies to literary studies. It is so new, in fact, that the first and, as of writing, only text on post-conflict studies, is a collection of essays, *Post-Conflict Literature* (2016) edited by Chris Andrews and Matt McGuire. This text marks the incipient movement to establish taxonomic and theoretical connections between Peace and Conflict studies as applied to literature. As one of the editors McGuire, explains in the introduction, “The current volume aims to open up a dialogue between the disciplinary logic of literary studies and the conceptual vocabulary created by Peace and Conflict Studies” (4). Moreover, he contends that his volume represents an inaugural attempt to examine “the possibilities of literature as both a source of knowledge and an object of political enquiry” (4). Work in this area is particularly nascent, as is the “development of a new conceptual vocabulary through which scholars have attempted to theorise the aftermath of political conflict and the advent of peace” (McGuire 4).

The exponential growth of this emerging academic field is reflected in its equally fluid and dynamic taxonomy, in which definitions and applications are constantly changing and evolving. Examining the literature of the past twenty years highlights this continual shift as authors refer to: “post-Troubles” writers as those born after 1969, “post-agreement” novels as those published after the 1998 GFA, “post-conflict” novels as referring either to novels published sometime after 1998, or alternatively referring to those novels that bear little or no mention of the Troubles. Such mapping poses an obvious problem when trying to pin down and utilise definitions in which the goal posts are always shifting and in which no definitive literary theory has coalesced. Matt McGuire et al. do not attempt to refine or define post-conflict literature;

instead, as the editors summarise, “Key terms in that vocabulary include restorative and transitional justice, truth and reconciliation, the cost of conflict, human rights, post-traumatic memory, gendered peace, therapeutic storytelling and discourses of victimhood” (4). The volume they have edited represents the attempt to examine literature in these terms, and to demonstrate how “our understanding of them is illuminated and sometimes questioned by the reading of these literary texts” (4).

For the purposes of this thesis, “post-conflict novel” refers to those novels published after the new millennium, in which the authors have allowed time for the impact of the GFA to be assimilated by society and incorporated into their novels. That this is the case is increasingly evident in the novels selected for examination, in that those published in the early 2000s are most concerned with the problematic impact of the peace process and the legacy of the Troubles, while those published subsequently establish a geographical and thematic distance from these events. Throughout my research it became apparent that there were recurring themes and concurring narrative devices that determined how masculinities are depicted in these novels. The impact of trauma is evident in each of them, regardless of whether the Troubles are depicted as central or peripheral to the narrative, thus positioning representations of trauma as central to the emerging genre of post-conflict fiction.

The authors and novels I analyse represent varying dimensions of Northern Irish masculine experience. In selecting these works my aim is to encompass a wide range of novels and authors which have depicted a spectrum of multivalent masculinities across the breadth of the past twenty years. It had not been my intention to choose only male authors, however, just as the narrative of the Troubles itself has been predominantly male, so too have been the novelists relating that narrative. Female writers have clearly been the exception rather than the norm in

Northern Ireland until only as recently as 2016, which Magennis has described in an online article for *The Conversation*, as a “landmark year for Northern Irish women’s fiction” (*Fiction by Northern Irish Women*). These novels often depict female protagonists and concerns that have long gone unheard. However, I chose works by established male authors of a variety of ages who hail from and depict a diverse range of both rural and urban areas in Northern Ireland. The reason for this is that it is male authors who particularly and intimately depict the male perspective in these narratives. Furthermore, by choosing to analyse the work of male authors of a variety of ages one may discern how these authors’ ages and generational differences affect their depictions of masculinities.

The analysis put forward in each of the chapters demonstrates a chrono thematic progression across a selection of the literary fiction written in Northern Ireland during the past two decades. I examine novels both depicting and published in the earliest days of the peace process through to the present, nearly twenty years later. By so doing I establish how each novel is representative of various key points in that process while contextualising it within an overarching linear trajectory. I concurrently compare and contrast the key themes emerging in the depictions of masculinities in the literature as correlative not only to the specific socio-historical period, but also their intertextual relationships. Themes which are now recognised as central to post-conflict literature, such as the role of trauma and memory, and transgenerational trauma, play a deliberate role in the construction of masculinities as this process increasingly moves away from the problematic hegemonic ideal towards more diverse and potentially ameliorative forms of masculinity.

I begin my analysis by focusing on the works of Derry born author Sean O’Reilly in Chapter One, “Troubled Masculinities: Traumatized Masculinity in Sean O’Reilly’s *Love and*

*Sleep: A Romance* and *The Swing of Things*.” His ironically titled 2002 novel *Love and Sleep: A Romance* is indisputably emblematic of its time. Its dark, gritty portrayal of sex, violence and madness in post-ceasefire Derry is evocative of other works such as Anna Burns’ *No Bones*, a similarly violent invective depicting sex and violence, or Simon Kerr’s *The Rainbow Singer*, whose fourteen-year-old Loyalist protagonist commits a mass shooting in America while on a cross-community programme. What differentiates *Love and Sleep* from the other novels of the period is its focus on a deeply disturbed protagonist, whose intradiegetic narration is problematised, and to an extent pathologised, by symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. In interview with Paula Shields, O’Reilly avers that his text is essentially an inverse confessional novel; what actually unravels in the mind of his tormented protagonist is an angry vituperation against the hegemonic expectations of a deeply traumatised Northern Irish society.

*The Swing of Things* portrays the life of an IRA member released via the contentious Early Release Scheme of the Good Friday Agreement. O’Reilly’s 2004 novel is a prescient narrative depicting the early release (as part of the stipulations of the Good Friday Agreement) of former IRA man Noel Boyle into post-conflict society. It sets out a unique and pertinent portrayal of the inescapable consequences of violent masculinities underscored by the trauma of not only the Troubles, but of Boyle’s arrest. If the complex narrative technique of *Love and Sleep* is indicative of a cumulative trauma and its impact on masculinity, then *The Swing of Things* is an extension of the traumatised masculinity into what would surely be classed as the quintessential trauma novel. These works explicitly depict masculinities impacted by the key early stages of the peace process and establish the role that trauma will continue to play in each of the novels.



Born in Derry in 1969 and having published novels and short story collections from 1999 to 2018, the legacy and influence of the Troubles is clear in O'Reilly's work. Despite garnering much critical acclaim in *The Guardian* and *The Irish Times*, as Fiona McCann notes, there has been very little critical attention devoted to his works, apart from the aforementioned articles by both McCann and Maeve Davey. Crucially, this chapter is the first to analyse these works, not as the inverse confessional novels the author intended, but rather, with the benefit of contemporary literary trauma analysis, as works of trauma fiction and early examples of the Northern Irish post-conflict novel. This is key to my thesis argument as the role of trauma in the Northern Irish novel post-2000 becomes increasingly prevalent, so as to become an almost ubiquitous element in any definition of Northern Irish post-conflict fiction. This chapter lays out the theoretical framework, arguing exactly why and how these novels conform to the emergent genre of trauma fiction and how the masculinities depicted within them represent and convey the impact of trauma on masculine gender identity construction. In order to emphasise the interrelationship between character and form I utilise Caruthian literary trauma theory to examine both the novel and the masculinities it depicts as inherently traumatised. Finally, I examine how O'Reilly illuminates the ways in which Northern Irish society as a whole is complicit in supporting the construction and valorisation of hypermasculine, hegemonic masculinity and its singular lack of support in facilitating this transition to non-violent masculinities.

The second chapter is entitled "Queering Masculinities: Locating and Locuting the Other in the Northern Irish Post-Conflict *Bildungsroman*." Queer theory is of integral importance to the discourse on masculinities on multiple levels. Connell states that the foundation of her theory is the "idea of a hierarchy of masculinities grew directly out of homosexual men's experience with violence and prejudice from straight men" (Connell and Messerschmidt 831). As Wilchins

argues, whether biologically or socially constructed, “gayness and gender will always be inextricably intertwined” (15). It is imperative to consider novels depicting queer male protagonists, particularly as there is currently no academic investigation of queer masculinities in the Northern Irish novel. Magennis contends that “homosexuality is rarely represented in NI fiction” and that there is a “barely audible queer Ulster voice” (*SOU* 80). Her overview of the literature from the early twentieth century to contemporary novels reveals little more than indirect allusion to homosexuality.

Conversely, I establish that in fact there has been an emergence in male queer fiction post-millennium. Those novels depicting queer masculinities and protagonists, while published at different times over the past twenty years, and despite being set in different decades and areas, were written by male gay authors from a Catholic Nationalist background. Textually the parallels continue, both thematically and stylistically, as each of these novels conforms to the *bildungsroman* format. While I have supplemented my analyses with works by Brian Kennedy and other novels by Jarlath Gregory, I focus on three key texts: Jarlath Gregory’s 2001 novel *Snapshots*, Damian McNicholl’s 2004 *A Son Called Gabriel* and Paul McVeigh’s 2016 Polari Prize-winning, *The Good Son*. These *bildungsromane* (the plural of *bildungsroman*) represent different decades, from the late sixties and seventies through to the late nineties. They are set in a mixture of both rural and urban settings, from the Antrim Hills to Belfast, yet there are prevalent parallels, which make these examples of the genre especially suitable for intertextual inquiry. Moreover, this chapter looks to the larger trend, notable in post-conflict writing, of the format of the *bildungsroman* as the “Coming Out” novel and considers why these novels have been written exclusively by authors from Nationalist, Catholic backgrounds.

Among contemporary fiction writers in Northern Ireland, David Park has featured fatherhood the most prominently in his novels. The third chapter, “Like Father, Like Son? Transgenerational Trauma and Intergenerational Masculinities in David Park’s *Swallowing the Sun* and *The Light of Amsterdam*,” analyses the important and often problematic relationship of the father-son dyad in two of his works. The role of the father is often observed as critical in the formation of a son’s construction of masculinity (Miller 194). The father is perceived as emblematising normative masculinity and fosters in his son a sense of masculine self. However, as integral as this interrelationship is, it is also a potentially problematic one, “replete with much tension and discomfort” (Miller 194). Indeed, as all the novels studied in this thesis demonstrate, the father-son relationship in the Northern Irish novel is often depicted as fundamentally dysfunctional. Even the optimal relationship is complicated by the necessary psycho-social factors of self-individuation. However, in many of these novels the relationship is affected further by a traditionally patriarchal father’s emotional or physical absence. Often these novels highlight a profoundly felt void or disconnect between father and son, which theorists refer to as the “father wound” (Miller 194). I contend that this “void” is itself a trauma, which, as per Caruth’s formulation, may then potentially be transmitted transgenerationally, affecting succeeding generations. In order to elucidate the role this trauma plays in men’s self-conscious construction of masculinity I analyse depictions of two very different father-son relationships at two very different times in the post-conflict continuum.

David Park’s 2004 novel *Swallowing the Sun* is concerned with the immediate fallout from the Troubles and the peace process. Depicting the effects of cycles of domestic and sectarian violence through three generations of father-son relationships, *Swallowing the Sun* is an intimate portrayal of fatherhood and masculinity as affected by trauma. His 2012 novel, *The*

*Light of Amsterdam*, is extremely different, featuring a more contemporary relationship in a new, more optimistic Northern Ireland and beyond. The relationship, and indeed the novel, is nearly devoid of any mention of the Troubles or its impact. While the masculinities embodied have changed, there remain pertinent issues of trauma in the form of the father wound. This chapter offers a pioneering exploration of the impact of transgenerational trauma and its impact on the construction of masculinities in the Northern Irish post-conflict novel.

The final chapter, “Ageing Masculinities: Not Just ‘A Young Man’s Game’— Gendering Gerontology in *Midwinter Break* and *The Truth Commissioner*,” addresses one of the most glaring omissions of literary masculinity studies, the dearth of literature depicting “the impact of age on male experience” (Hobbs 389). While feminist theory delineates and differentiates the varying socio-cultural expectations and adaptations of women throughout their life-course, Hobbs argues there is little to no such scholarship on men. He asserts that, “Men’s studies theory has proposed a rather homogenised view of manhood, making little reference to the stages of a man’s life and how age can affect masculine identity” (389). Indeed, the hegemonic masculine script, as Spector-Marcel notes, is essentially abbreviated as it “concludes at middle age” (68). Thus, the hierarchical nature of hegemonic masculinity diacritically dictates that older is other. This represents an opportunity to examine ageing masculinities as alternative to and potentially destabilising their hierarchical concept of hegemonic masculinity.

Hobbs contends that this void in masculinity theory “is reciprocated in literary masculinity studies” (389). He specifically addresses the disparity in literature noting that “While there have been studies concerned with female-authored literary portrayals of older women, there has not been a comparative study for male characters, written by men or women” (Hobbs 389).

As of the time of writing this chapter is the only academic scholarship dedicated to the importance of these depictions of ageing masculinities in the Northern Irish novel.

As the population ages so too do authors. David Park and Bernard MacLaverty are two veteran Northern Irish writers, and both depict men and masculinities beyond middle age. David Park's 2008 novel *The Truth Commissioner* is more than a political thriller. Depicting several masculine protagonists across varying stages of their life course, his portrayal of the two eldest protagonists, Francis Gilroy and James Fenton, is central to this analysis. While they are ideologically disparate, Park depicts these two ageing men diachronistically, paralleling their experiences and attitudes as they struggle to construct an ageing masculine identity. Crucially, these are ageing men who embodied violent hegemonic masculinities in their youth from polarised ends of the political spectrum. Francis Gilroy, ex-IRA Commander, is now a Minister for Children and Culture and is a man for whom ageing erodes his masculine identity. James Fenton, ex-member of Special Branch, is illustrative of the more active ageing man, investing himself in hill walking and charitable works. Current gendered gerontological theories diverge across similar lines, and this chapter argues that Gilroy is representative of the discontinuous model of ageing, associated with senescence and decline, for whom ageing is eroding his masculine self. In contrast, Fenton is emblematic of the active "continuous" model of ageing masculinity, which is often criticised as an extension of middle age.

In contrast, I examine the depiction of ageing masculinity in Bernard MacLaverty's *Midwinter Break* in order to ascertain how and if the intervening years have influenced a later post-conflict interpretation of ageing masculinity. MacLaverty's touching and evocative portrayal of a septuagenarian couple shows how each character struggles to come to terms with their shared trauma of the Troubles to renegotiate ageing, gendered identities. This chapter is the

first to examine post-conflict depictions of ageing masculinity with a gendered gerontological lens. It considers the intersectionality of masculinity with the embodiment of ageing, sexuality and intimacy via Erik Erikson's lens of generativity versus stagnancy in order to iterate plural, positive multivalent masculinities. It also explicates the specific challenges ageing presents to the construction of masculine identity and the potential for literary representations of ageing masculinity to subvert and depolarise hierarchical hegemonic masculinity.

Given the statistics that Tomlinson has presented, I contend that it is more important than ever to engage in a constructive discussion and dissemination of varying models of masculinity, particularly within the context of post-conflict Northern Ireland. While the post-conflict genre is still emerging and evolving, the Northern Irish novel remains a key repository for and of discursive masculinity. Located at transitional junctures in the evolution of a post-conflict society, these works engage with and enable a multivalent spectrum of masculinity as a contiguous move away from the hegemonic models of the past.

## Chapter One: Troubling Masculinities: The Traumatized Masculine in Sean O'Reilly's *Love and Sleep: A Romance* and *The Swing of Things*

“The test of every religious, political, or educational system is the man which it forms”

*Amiel's Journal: The Journal Intime of Henri Frédéric Amiel*

While it may not have been philosopher, poet and critic Henri Frédéric Amiel's intention, the above quotation nonetheless serves as a poignant insight into the interrelated nature of society and the construction of masculinity. Given the importance of the socio-cultural and historical dimensions implicit in constructing masculinity, this chapter examines the impact of trauma, specifically the trauma of the Troubles, on establishing and representing Northern Irish masculinities. In it I discuss the emergence of the genre of trauma fiction and how Sean O'Reilly's works may be read as trauma fiction. This provides an essential starting point from which to deconstruct literary depictions of masculinity over the past twenty years under the immediate influence of the peace process.

Described in interview by Shane Barry as “one of the most interesting writers working today, Irish or otherwise,” Sean O'Reilly has received great critical acclaim for his novels. From his collection of short stories, *Curfew and Other Stories*, published in 2000, O'Reilly has gone on to write *Love and Sleep: A Romance* (listed as one of the Irish Times' 50 greatest Irish novels) in 2002, *The Swing of Things* in 2004 and *Watermark* in 2005. Described by Sean O'Hagan in *The Guardian* “as young enough to be termed as a post-Troubles author” O'Reilly was born in Derry in 1969 and lived through the conflict in Northern Ireland. This confers an authority and verisimilitude to O'Reilly's depiction of protagonists whose lives are irrevocably impacted by the atrocities of the period, however despite being published over ten years ago, his work is only recently garnering academic attention. Current academic articles include Fiona McCann's discussion of depictions of place in “The Post-Past City”: Apocalyptic Cityscapes and Cultural

Stagnation in the Fiction of Sean O'Reilly” and the notion of O'Reilly's writing as *écriture féminine* in “From Violent Masculinities to Gynandricity? Sean O'Reilly's *Watermark*.” Critic Maeve Davey has also examined his work through the lens of post-colonialism in her informative article, “The strange heart beating': Bird Imagery, Masculinities and the Northern Irish Postcolonial Gothic in the novels of Sean O'Reilly and Peter Hollywood.” None of this work, however, has focused on the element of trauma so integral to his novels and to the problematic masculinities they depict. It could be that a requisite period of time has elapsed to allow for this original interpretation of Sean O'Reilly's novels in the context of literary trauma theory and to establish them within the genre of post-conflict literature.

The mid to late nineties demarcated a time of enormous political change in Northern Ireland. Precipitated by the initial IRA and loyalist ceasefires in 1994 and the reinstatement of the IRA ceasefire in 1997, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 was putatively perceived to signal the end of some thirty-five years of sectarian violence and to usher in a new post-conflict era in Northern Ireland. This was a problematic, and arguably traumatic, transition involving considerable political and cultural upheaval in the region. It is this crucial transitional period that Sean O'Reilly's novels *Love and Sleep: A Romance* and *The Swing of Things* are particularly concerned with and in which they are set.

The concept of trauma is often cited as coming to prominence in 1980 with the clinical establishment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder by the American Psychiatric Association (Caruth 3; Whitehead 4). However, it was not until the mid to late nineties that post-structuralist theorists, by consolidating and contemporising key Freudian concepts, were able to establish a definitive theoretical paradigm of trauma. Yale theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Soshana Felman assimilated and adapted Freud's research into the dynamic relationship between trauma,



repression and symptomology. The tenet central to their work is the concept of belatedness, referred to by the Freudian neologism *Nachträglichkeit* (literally translated as “Afterwardsness”). This is the idea that some events are so deeply traumatic that they simply cannot be experienced fully as they occur, rather there is a period of latency between the traumatic event and the eventual expression of pathological symptomology. Caruth paraphrases Freud to explain this.

It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave physical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 7)

This period of latency, or belatedness, is central to the work of Caruth and Felman who expound upon Freud’s paradigmatic formula “trauma-defence-latency-outbreak of the neurosis-partial return of the repressed material” (*Moses and Monotheism*, 23:80). In so doing these theorists establish the theoretical basis for the innovative hermeneutic of literary trauma theory. *Trauma Fiction*, Whitehead’s foundational text of 2004, subsumes Caruth’s theories of traumatogenic symptomology within a narrative context to establish trauma fiction as a genre in its own right. Later literary theorists such as Robert Garratt come to further refine and define the genre’s characteristics. Trauma fiction centrally depicts, for example, “the struggle of a disturbed individual to discover, confront, and give voice to a vague yet threatening catastrophic past” (Garratt 5). By depicting trauma both stylistically and narratively the genre “stakes its claim as a literary hybrid, a work that balances narration and narrative, a story that describes an external violent action and portrays the mind’s attempts to remember it” (Garrett 5).

Whitehead argues that the genre of trauma fiction has arisen from “three interrelated backgrounds or contexts: postmodernism, postcolonialism and a post-war legacy or consciousness” (81). These three elements are extremely relevant to O’Reilly’s novels, given their socio-cultural context of the transitional post-conflict period of Northern Irish history. The ironically entitled *Love and Sleep: A Romance*, self-consciously plays on the typical first-person narrative as protagonist Niall recounts his traumatic return to post-ceasefire, “post-past” Derry (*Love and Sleep* xvi) and the series of events that culminate in his lover’s violent death when she is mistakenly shot by the British army. Postmodern themes of fragmentation, dissociation and trauma are reflected in O’Reilly’s deliberate employment of various narrative strategies. Constant disjunctions in narrative linearity lead to a sense of temporal ambiguity and the fragmentary prose reflects Caruth’s post-structuralist theory of trauma which emphasises “linguistic indeterminacy, ambiguous referentiality and aporia” (Balaev, “Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered” 1).

While *Love and Sleep: A Romance* depicts the turmoil of the peace process in the late nineties, *The Swing of Things* depicts the post-millennium fallout from that process. Former IRA protagonist Noel Boyle is recently released from prison by the Sentence Review Commission as per the stipulations of the Good Friday Agreement. Boyle clearly demonstrates classic symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and the novel charts his problematic and unsuccessful attempts to reintegrate himself into post-conflict society, leading to his egress to Dublin. Sabotaged as much by his own unconscious drives as of those of his treacherous and unstable companion Fada, Boyle’s attempt to make a new start for himself in Dublin as a philosophy student is ultimately and inevitably doomed. Murdered by the very fraternity for whom he once went to

prison, Boyle's naiveté and vulnerability mark him as a character quite apart from the typical representation of hypermasculine paramilitary.

It is crucial to firmly establish that these works fall within the literary genre of trauma fiction, as this reading offers a unique opportunity for insights into the depiction of challenges facing post-conflict masculinity. O'Reilly's novels depict both protagonists' constructions of masculine identity as irrevocably influenced by trauma. Trauma plays an essential role in constructing masculinity and patriarchal masculinity is in itself inherently traumatising, especially when treated within the crucible of Northern Irish society. As such the aim of this chapter is not only to examine the main character's traumatic pathologies but also to 'pathologise' male gender socialisation as it is depicted in O'Reilly's novels, within the context of trauma.

Despite the confluence between the evolution of trauma theory and O'Reilly's novels, to date there has been no critical examination of O'Reilly's texts as examples of trauma fiction. Although the genre was formalised after the publication of his novels, nonetheless critics like Caruth and Felman had already begun applying the hermeneutic of trauma theory to literature. This is at once a significant academic oversight and a unique opportunity for academic endeavour. By focusing on novels that depict this particularly significant socio-historical setting, this chapter will provide original critical insight and establish an important foundation from which to examine emerging masculinities in Northern Irish post-conflict fiction.

### **1. *Love and Sleep: A Romance as Trauma Fiction.***

Felman and Laub's ground-breaking text *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* was the first to establish the tacit connection between literature and testimony. Felman observes that "testimony is indeed pervasive, how it is implicated –

sometimes unexpectedly – in almost every kind of writing” (7). Whether cognisant or not, “the contemporary writer often dramatises the predicament (whether chosen or imposed, whether conscious or unconscious) of a voluntary, or of an unwitting, inadvertent, and sometimes involuntary witness to a trauma” (Felman and Laub 4). Thus, regardless of genre or even authorial intent, any text may serve as a narrative of testimony. This research proved essential to Caruth’s development of literary trauma theory.

Concomitantly, Cathy Caruth was expounding upon the traditional Freudian paradigm of trauma, in an attempt to formulise a post-structuralist model of trauma. Extemporising upon Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*, Caruth emphasises that “in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness” (*TEM* 6). Within this latency, Henry Krystal asserts, “no trace of registration of any kind is left in the psyche, instead a void, a hole is found” (202). Caruth posits that this constitutes “unclaimed experience”, a traumatic, disassociating event that defies linguistic explication, or what Felman and Laub describe as “the impossibility of telling” (64). Lacking the ability to assimilate or articulate this event, the traumatised individual’s consciousness and sense of self becomes fractured as “extreme trauma creates a second self” (Lifton 137). As the self is fractured, memory is pathologised as paradoxically one may be amnesiac to the singular traumatic event while simultaneously hounded by “intruding memories and unbidden repetitive images of traumatic events” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 181). Caruth interprets this repetition as a temporal paradox, the imposition of the past traumatic event onto the present, signifying that trauma “is not an event encapsulated in the past, but as a history which is essentially *not over* ... whose traumatic consequences are still actively evolving” (Felman and Laub xiv). LaCapra stresses that traumatic reconciliation can only occur when one’s

memories and sense of self are fully reintegrated, this is achieved by acting out or working through one's trauma, via the retelling of testimony ("Trauma Absence Loss" 696).

These post-structuralist theories culminated in the late nineties to form the basis for contemporary trauma theory and the genesis of a powerful literary hermeneutic which has established trauma fiction as a genre. However, one may well question the central aporia at the heart of this paradigm: if the traumatic experience "overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation" it surely precludes narrative representation (Whitehead 3). Trauma fiction addresses this issue by utilising a myriad of interesting narrative and stylistic innovations, to marry symptomatic pathology with narrative technique. As Anne Whitehead notes, authors of trauma fiction impart the impact of trauma "by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection" (3). This differentiates trauma novels from novels about trauma which "employ conventional narrative strategies, points of view and linear story lines" (Garratt 5). Trauma fiction relies on a more complex narrative strategy to demonstrate "the limitations of narrative and to convey the damaging and distorting impact of the traumatic event" (Whitehead 81). Thematically the trauma novel reflects Caruth's precepts of "the process by which a person encounters and comes to know a traumatic event or moment that has previously proved inaccessible" (Garratt 5). Thus, as Garratt asserts, "In a trauma novel, both subject and method become central" (5). The same applies to O'Reilly's two novels *Love and Sleep* and *The Swing of Things*. Given their focus on distinctive narrative innovations and dislocations, as well as the traumatic recollections of their disturbed protagonists, the novels clearly belong within the genre of trauma fiction.

Both O'Reilly and his novelist narrator are conscious of the potential of the narrative to achieve cathartic effects, if only to deliberately subvert these expectations, to resist the notion of narrative catharsis or traumatic reconciliation, "the drive to reconcile traumatic memories once they have been reclaimed" (Garratt 81). The narrator states in the introduction that "I don't need company. Or forgiveness, or any cure at knife-point" (*Love and Sleep* xvii). This reveals an ambivalence, a conflict within the heart of the novel, as if the narrator is drawn by an imperative to testify to those traumatic events he experienced and is at the same time sceptical about what an explication of events may achieve. O'Reilly is conscious of the limitations of this type of textual discourse. Speaking with Paula Shields in interview for *Fortnight* publications, he reveals that Niall "is an attack on the use of first person (narrative) itself, an attack on self-indulgence, after that whole spate of first-person narrative that came out from the mid-90s until today." This Shields interprets, in the same article, as "a swipe at the modern trend of first-person confessional writing." However, by employing the hermeneutic of trauma theory one may view, regardless of O'Reilly's intent, *Love and Sleep: A Romance* not as a confessional novel but rather a form of literary testimony, the textual representation of witnessing trauma, a survivor's narrative.

Indeed, the confessional novel and testimonial narrative (implicit within the trauma novel) bear many textual and stylistic similarities, so much so that, as Susannah Radstone observes, there is a "marked tendency to associate or even conflate testimonial texts and discourses with those of confession" (168). Radstone, however, emphasises that these discursive modes are essentially differentiated by their focus on intra- and inter-subjectivity respectively. She posits that most contemporary theory "concurs that confession is nevertheless a fundamentally intra-subjective discourse aimed at achieving self-transformation and an end to

self-scrutiny by confessing the past” (170). Testimony, Radstone conversely argues, focuses on the difficulties inherent in inter-subjectivity, in trying paradoxically to communicate that which precludes registration: “the impossibility of containing or communicating to others that which has been experienced or witnessed by the testifier” (169). For Radstone, the confessional subject and text are inherently problematised, whereas within testimony the site and locus of problematisation is located externally to the subject. As such, “testimony represents the ‘turning inside out’ of the confessional self so that the trouble which resided within and even constituted the subject is now deemed to be positioned outside the self” (Radstone 171). She further posits that as a result this “cleanses the testimonial subject of all sin at the expense of history or perpetration” (171). This perhaps oversimplifies the traumatised subject, as traumatic responses can and do “include shame, doubt or guilt” often attributed to the confessional modality (Vickroy 130). This chapter contends that O’Reilly is not presenting an ironic or inverse confessional novel, but that his novels more accurately portray and parallel the survivors’ testimony, a defining feature of trauma fiction.

Garratt observes that central to trauma fiction is the depiction of a disturbed and traumatised individual’s reconstruction of events and that in “almost every single case the narrator’s retelling focuses on a single event involving an intense moment of personal suffering, the discovery and understanding of which are keys to both character and storyline” (70). *Love and Sleep: A Romance* is a literal retelling of events as protagonist Niall acts as narrator, the novel his attempt to write about the trauma of his ex-lover Lorna’s accidental murder (shot in crossfire by the British army). Written as first person intradiegetic narrator, the novel comprises both prologue and epilogue with eight interim chapters, ostensibly following standard narrative conventions. However, as is typical of trauma fiction, *Love and Sleep* “relies on the

intensification of conventional narrative modes and methods” (Whitehead 84), often deliberately problematising its own linguistic strategies.

Niall’s narrative often segues into hallucinatory, dreamlike sequences so subtly that it is only in retrospect the reader comes to question the reality of events and Niall’s credibility as narrator. In the novel’s prologue Niall relates a chance sighting of Lorna on a tram in Derry, recalling that the driver rang a bell to which “everyone on the tram jumped up and started banging on the windows at her with their gloved hands, waving and shouting; some of them were weeping with joy. It was the first time she has appeared outside of my dreams” (*Love and Sleep* xvi). Initially this reads as a perfectly viable, albeit strange event. However, there are several points that hint at the unreality of events, particularly to one *au fait* with Derry’s topography and history. The narrator mentions a tram, however Derry’s tramways stopped running in 1919. The incongruence here, of the anachronistic tram and the unlikeliness of the passengers’ reaction, suggests a subtle yet profound intimation of unreality. This is juxtaposed by the narrator’s assertion that this transpired outside of his dreams, creating a disjunction between imagination and reality. It is only in retrospect that the reader is able to interpret that this is part of a sequence of increasingly intensifying hallucinations, which narrator Niall can no longer differentiate from reality.

This conforms to Garratt’s notion that “Frequently in the trauma novel the reader must puzzle over the relationship between what is being told or described by the traumatised voice and the reality of the event itself” (6). This narrative device perfectly mimics traumatic symptomology: the reader, like Niall, is unable to distinguish reality from unreality, underpinning the entire narrative with a sense of indeterminacy. This ambiguity is a specific



characteristic of trauma fiction, as Garratt emphasises, “this confusion is never present in novels about trauma where the separation between event and victim is always clearly developed” (6).

Whitehead propounds that “if trauma is at all susceptible to narrative formulation, then it requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence” (6). Indeed, there are frequent examples of temporal dislocation in the novel. Ostensibly both the prologue and epilogue delineate Niall in the “present” moment reflecting on his own narrative with the intervening chapters comprising a retrospective written in the perfect past tense. However, temporality is condensed and disjointed within this overarching context. The diachronous prologue features a conglomeration of varying confusing temporal standpoints and tenses, opening with an event from the past depicted with the present tense, “Lorna *is* drunk; I *am* drunk, full of vindictive excitement” (*Love and Sleep* ix). The narrative then suddenly shifts from the past tense to the present continuous “that morning I *had* woken up” to “She *is* sitting beside me” (*Love and Sleep* ix). Each spatio-temporal narrative shift from one time and place to another undermines the narrative chronology, discomfiting the reader. The effect simulates the manner in which past memories are imposing on Niall’s present, as he struggles to pull his memories together into a coherent narrative. Typically of trauma fiction, this is a narrative reflection of traumatic pathology, indicating that the past and present have become intrinsically linked in the mind of the traumatised narrator. The past “remains ongoing in the individual’s consciousness, replaying previous actions and experiences” (Garratt 3).

Themes of dislocation, fragmentation and isolation typify O’Reilly’s works, as he has explained to Shane Barry, “I enjoy fragmentedness. The bones showing. Incompleteness. Indeterminacy.” This resonates with Caruth’s post-structuralist theory of trauma and in particular, to recall Balaev’s specific observation that trauma fiction emphasises “linguistic

indeterminacy, ambiguous referentiality and aporia” (“Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered”

1). This is expressed in O’Reilly’s lexical style, often broken by lacunae and ellipses. In addition, O’Reilly will abruptly interrupt his prose with lyrical interpositions. The more prosaic style of the epilogue, for example, is interrupted by a dissonant, narrative break, a disjunction of narrative voice, tone and typography in the interjected lines:

This is not a waning.

The twilight groans ... and drapes the streets in a filthy caul.

This is the fledgling time. The world damp yet and unwashed. (*Love and Sleep* xv)

This is indicative of the manner in which “narrative convention gives way to fragmentation, random imagery and internal thought patterns” and is characteristic of trauma fiction (Garratt 27). It also perhaps suggests O’Reilly’s attempt to articulate the “unspeakable” nature of trauma, the void in experience, which is liminally from a semiotic space akin to *écriture* feminine rather than the prosaic form employed previously. Another key narrative technique utilised in trauma fiction is that of repetition, both thematically and on a linguistic level. “Repetition mimics the effects of trauma, for it suggests the insistent return of the event and the disruption of the narrative chronology or progression” (Whitehead 86). This is demonstrably significant in *Love and Sleep*, particularly in reference to a nightmarish scenario that recurrently appears in times of trauma in the text. Overwrought at the suggestion that he reconcile with his estranged brother, Niall is lying “exhausted and delirious” on the bathroom floor (*Love and Sleep* 6). At this point, as in the prologue, reality again merges with hallucination as the narrator describes that “hordes of children were rushing to me from all sides, they were naked and painted ... I saw myself running in terror through the streets and into the forest as they pursued me” (*Love and Sleep* 6). This recurring nightmarish vision continues to haunt Niall, perhaps triggered by associations

with his home and childhood in Derry. Van der Kolk and Van der Hart speculate that traumatic memories may surface “as physical sensations, horrific images or nightmares” (164) and that these memories are often triggered in “situations reminiscent of the original traumatic situation” (164). Niall’s sometime dream sometime hallucination is inextricably linked to his return to Derry. Prompted by thoughts of Derry’s empty “withered” streets Niall tells Lorna of a recurring nightmare. In his dream he is chased by “a gang of naked children” who proceed to “maul me and start ripping me to pieces with their hands and their mouths and teeth” (*Love and Sleep* 31). It is as if Niall is being literally and symbolically consumed by his childhood, a traumatic childhood marred by the horrific events of the Troubles. This violent cannibalistic vision returns again and again to Niall in moments of extreme stress. Later, after having desecrated his father’s grave, Niall is plagued by dreams of “the children, gathered in a vast crowd all around me, naked, seized by diabolical fits” (*Love and Sleep* 143). Further on in the novel, when Niall and Lorna retreat to a country cottage Niall becomes overwhelmed by isolation and paranoia, the dream is alluded to by “the voices of children” (*Love and Sleep* 165, 173). O’Reilly’s use of repetition on both a narrative as well as thematic level serves to reinforce the idea that a victim of trauma is “continually haunted and shaped by previous events and moments of intense violence” (Garratt 3).

O’Reilly’s characterisation of Niall is as exemplary of trauma fiction as his narrative techniques. Clearly, the socio-cultural situation in Northern Ireland has adversely affected Niall and his construction of masculinity. Niall’s very ingress to the country is traumatic for him, and he is dogged by the anxiety and paranoia symptomatic of traumatic pathology. His decision to return to Derry is related in terms of traumatic resonance, like “a man who can’t believe in the reality of what he has just done – I felt sickened by a sense of powerlessness as I tried to

remember waiting for the train in Rome and then Milan” (*Love and Sleep* 4). He cannot remember consciously making such a decision, stating, “I must have been in a state of shock” (*Love and Sleep* 4). As Felman and Laub remark, massive psychic trauma “precludes its registration” (5). Niall then describes the “frantic months” when he “tried to return, if that was what I was doing” to his hometown (*Love and Sleep* 7), during which time he was afraid to wander the streets of Derry. Hypervigilant, constantly seeking signs of imminent danger, he writes that, “another face looked at me twice and I was sure some comment was passed ... I veered off into a quieter street and leaned against a wall, then felt too conspicuous” (*Love and Sleep* 7). Here Niall tries to affect masculine confidence, attempting to portray strength and unaffectedness by leaning against the wall “casually” in what amounts to a performance of masculinity, bravado in the face of fear. However, he is aware that this performance is superficial, and unconvincing.

It is clear that just being back in his hometown is traumatic for Niall. He feels suffocated by Derry, “there was nowhere to escape from people who knew my name ... I couldn’t understand why I felt so humiliated and petrified merely being seen on the street” (*Love and Sleep* 7-8). This parallels the Freudian model of trauma as Niall clearly displays traumatic symptomology yet cannot fathom or represent the locus of this trauma. Niall’s extremes of emotion, shame and nausea, being “paranoid all the time” (*Love and Sleep* 11) are paradoxically juxtaposed with the apathy indicated by what he describes as his “callous yearning for nothing at all” (*Love and Sleep* 12). However, at the heart of this contradiction is a further connection with traumatic experience. As Kai Erikson notes, although “Traumatized people often scan the surrounding world anxiously for signs of danger ... reacting with a start to ordinary sights and sounds” at the same time “all that nervous activity takes place against a numbed grey

background of depression, feelings of helplessness, and a general closing off of the spirit, as the mind tries to insulate itself from further harm” (184). These traumatic responses are emasculating emotions, certainly detrimental to Niall’s construction of what he perceives to be masculinity. This is evident in Niall’s subsequent reaction to a small group of girls merely walking along the same street who wish to pass him. At first Niall again attempts to portray masculine bravado, “I leaned back against the wall and tried to appear at my ease” (*Love and Sleep* 8); however, as the girls slow down to pass him, he believes “they sensed my embarrassment” and so he “bolted across the street like a frightened animal” (*Love and Sleep* 8). Interestingly, it is the depiction of violence that once again rouses feelings of masculinity within Niall. He stands on the walls of the city regarding the “newly scrubbed Bogside with its painted verandas, satellite dishes and hidden alleyways” evocative of the potential of a new post-conflict Derry. However there remains the reminder of past violence in the “gigantic mural of a boy in a gas mask, calmly waiting, in the smoke and mayhem of the riot, for the right moment to let fly with a petrol bomb” (*Love and Sleep* 8). Not only does this image mirror the topographical landscape of Derry at the time, but it can also be seen as a metaphor for the socio-political circumstances in that, even in the “scrubbed and clean” streets of a post IRA ceasefire Derry, violence still literally and metaphorically raises its head. However, this appeal to violence seems to provoke a sense of masculinity in Niall and as he looks at the mural he reminds himself that “this is the city where I was born and grew up; I had no reason to sneak around as though I was ashamed of being caught” (*Love and Sleep* 8). Indeed, as he walks the perimeter of Derry’s city walls he seems to draw strength from masculine imagery. He describes how “In this frame of mind, I decided to walk across the circumference of the old battlements, telling myself it would be good for me in some way” (*Love and Sleep* 8).

Not only are the streets of Derry a site of trauma for Niall, his male to male familial relationships with his brother and father are similarly fraught. His sister-in-law Martine relates the story of his leaving Derry to go to university in London, even the preface to her recollection has distinctly emasculating connotations, “We all laughed when that old woman sat in next to you. The look on your face. You were so embarrassed. Your mother singing” (*Love and Sleep* 5). There is an inherent incongruity here, in that as Niall embarks upon independence, which should be empowering, the episode is instead couched in embarrassment and effeminacy. It is almost as if going to university is not seen as a masculine endeavour. Niall’s father refuses to acknowledge the event, instead remaining in his car, which shows Martine that, “He was a cold man, we all know that” (*Love and Sleep* 5). This is the first intimation of a problematic and possibly traumatic relationship between father and son. Martine implies that mistreatment at the hands of a Protestant majority has reinforced masculine qualities of coldness, stoicism and lack of demonstrative emotionality in men of his father’s generation, “The men of his time were all like that. Think what they lived through – the forties and fifties in Northern Ireland; they were treated worse than animals” (*Love and Sleep* 5). It is as if Niall’s father considers Niall has ideas above his station; and believes that Niall should remain in Derry and emulate his father’s own construction of masculinity.

There is a sense that by leaving for university Niall has abandoned and rejected ‘his own’ community, the Catholic community and lifestyle of his father and his father’s generation. Martine continues, “And then you going off to university. How can they make sense of changes like that Niall?” (*Love and Sleep* 5). When Niall remarks that there “was nothing to come back for” Martine challenges him, “God forgive you. These are your own people” (*Love and Sleep* 5). The implication here is that Niall should have returned to support the community, particularly

during the Troubles. Niall, however, rejects this notion, “‘I’ll decide who my own people are’, I said bombastically, ‘or even if I want a people’” (*Love and Sleep* 5). Niall is deliberately constructing a masculinity that, unlike his father’s, is completely divorced from Northern Irish culture and politics. However, it may be possible that, despite his vehement protestations, Niall is repressing a sense of guilt, a guilt born of leaving his homeland, his community and his father’s embodiment of masculinity. While Niall has rejected his father’s ethno-political construction of masculinity, his brother Michael has not. It seems that in returning to Derry, even in the wake of his father’s death, a confrontation with his brother is as traumatic as a meeting with his father would have been. As Martine appeals to Niall to stay and talk to his brother, he becomes physically ill with anxiety, “a wave of nausea passed through me. Sweat broke out all over my face; I thought I was going to faint” (*Love and Sleep* 6). Niall’s trauma assumes the dimensions of physical illness, which is of particular significance to his brother. Niall spends time alone in his brother’s house “sickened with dread at the sense of my own loneliness” and he confronts his brother by saying, “You hate sickness, don’t you? You can’t bear the presence of weakness” (*Love and Sleep* 20). There is an underlying suggestion here that to be anything but in peak physical health is weakness and therefore emasculating for a man. Niall recalls a time when ill as a child he begged his brother to bring him water, “You came back with a glass and told me to open my mouth. What was it you gave to me? Do you remember Michael? Vinegar” (*Love and Sleep* 20). Michael merely retorts “And I’d do the same again” as if there is some inherent lesson in the act, a warning against seeming weak and unmanly. One might extrapolate that this is indicative of the view of society as a whole at that time; that by appearing weak one is inviting a punitive response. In a society in which mostly men rather than women were victims of sectarian violence, one might see the need to appear physically and mentally strong at all times. Niall tries

to provoke his brother, describing himself as “A wreck. Pathetic. It revolts you doesn’t it?” (*Love and Sleep* 20). Although the appearance of weakness may disgust his brother, Niall likewise perceives illness in others as unmanly. Speaking of his friend he says, “Danny struck me as sickly and depressed, I found it painful to even look at him” (*Love and Sleep* 84). It is as if the idealised notion of physicality prescribed by male gender socialisation has permeated Niall’s consciousness and construction of masculinity. This causes a conflict in his psyche, as being traumatised and ill he cannot perceive himself as masculine. For the traumatised, even the innocuous may become endowed with meaning and become symbols laden with traumatic connotations. O’Reilly often labels peripheral characters with titles of significance rather than names, one such example is that of “the purifier” (*Love and Sleep* 49). While walking one evening Niall sees a man slowly approach some nearly empty cans of beer strewn on the street. At first Niall mistakes the man as a kindred spirit, “I thought he was hoping to steal a sly drink.” He decides that he will “join in with him once he’d started; we’ll go and find a bar, I’ll be able to talk to him” (*Love and Sleep* 48). However, observing the man take painstaking and deliberate moves to empty each of the cans Niall realises, “he was making sure that as he lay in bed that night he would hear the wailed-out agony of the old drunks denied the last dribble of drink to see them through to the light” (*Love and Sleep* 48). This inexplicably infuriates Niall, “I was demented; I couldn’t believe what I had seen, or what it meant, or the pain it was causing me” (*Love and Sleep* 49). Niall attacks the man, kicking him several times then running away. This is indicative of traumatogenic pathology, a manifestation of the “breaking into explosive rages” which Kai Erikson describes as a characteristic response to trauma (181). Even this violent outburst is not sufficient to satiate Niall’s rage, his mind full of what he “should” have done to “the purifier, the boots and punches I should have inflicted on him, a paving stone clawed up and



dropped on his head, tearing him to pieces and smearing his blood and filth across all the lintels of the city” (*Love and Sleep* 49). This evidently extreme reaction at first seems inexplicable, however ‘the purifier’ resonates within Niall on a subconscious level, reminding him of his father and what he perceives as the petty, small-minded masculine ideology he embodies.

The first characteristic Niall observes of the purifier is his deliberately “slow pace” and how he was “taking his time getting home” (*Love and Sleep* 47). It is possible that this is a trigger for Niall, whose own father “walked at a pace that was too slow to watch for long without feeling exasperated by him” (*Love and Sleep* 43). Niall’s disgust at the actions of the purifier – “I had never imagined anything so meticulous, so pious” (*Love and Sleep* 49) - can be paralleled with his rage at what he perceives as his father’s emasculating subservience. Later in the novel Niall stumbles from a riot in a manic state and goes to his father’s grave where he describes hysterically “digging with the last of my strength at my father’s grave” (*Love and Sleep* 143). He cries out in frustration, declaiming his father, “Mute and obedient to the end in your fraying suits, your handkerchief under your knees at mass ... Your pride and baldy uprightness was a mask of fear” (*Love and Sleep* 139). He decries his father as a hypocrite, a man who cursed everything in his life, including his wife and children “and the struggle for freedom you taught me to think was beneath me” (*Love and Sleep* 139). Niall has not learned any positive prescribed masculine gender roles from his father. He has no example of intimacy, which could be part of the reason Niall himself is unable to find a fulfilling romantic relationship. Even the masculine role ensured by being involved in the Troubles, that of defender, protector, ‘freedom fighter’ is not a role condoned or exemplified by his father, whom Niall condemns as weak and emasculated, “You crossed yourself in shame if the sun came out. Coward ... coward – servitude ... Do you hear me now in your great realm of failure?” (*Love and Sleep* 139). Harland and Ashe

note that “the Troubles reinforced traditional forms of masculinities” (748), particularly, one must assume, violent masculinities. The Nationalist cause embodied by the IRA is one facet of valorised masculinity. However, while other men fought and died, Niall resents his father, perceiving him as passive and weak, pious and pathetic. Similarly, Niall perceives the purifier’s actions as cruel and pedantic and attacks the purifier as a proxy for his father.

Niall’s return to Derry is a physical example of the Freudian compulsion to repeat, *Weiderholungszwang*, which Garratt argues includes “the impulse to return to the situation of an accident or traumatic moment” (60). In the classic Freudian paradigm of trauma subscribed to by theorists such as Caruth, the standard convention is modelled around a single, violent traumatic event. However, current theorists are moving on from the traditionalist Freudian paradigm and allowing for a more pluralist interpretation of trauma. For example, Kai Erikson states that traumatic experience can in fact result from continued and consistent exposure to trauma, that its aetiology may be, “a continuing pattern of abuse as well as from a single searing assault, from a period of severe attenuation and erosion as well as from a sudden flash of fear” (185). It could be argued that Niall is suffering, not from a single traumatic exposure to violence, but rather from a culmination of traumatic childhood experiences during the Troubles in Derry. Maria Root, in her feminist analysis of the paradigmatic model of trauma, posits that there is another form of trauma, similarly experienced through continual exposure, the aetiology of which is society itself. Root refers to this as ‘insidious trauma’ which she defines as, “effects of oppression that are not necessarily violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to soul and spirit” (107). It is possible to apply this ideology to the construction of masculinity, that Niall is traumatised by a society that privileges and valorises traditional male gender roles. Vickroy notes that the gamut of traumatic responses often includes “shame, doubt

or guilt, or may destroy important beliefs in one's own safety, or view of oneself as decent, strong and autonomous" (131). This is obviously contraindicated of masculine ideals predominant societally during the Troubles, whose normative doctrine antithetically prescribed "Independence, autonomy, superiority over others, heterosexuality and aggression or violence" (Harland and Ashe 750). Traumatized and lacking a strong male role model, Niall's construction of masculinity is inherently conflicted. This exacerbates the problematic manner in which Niall attempts to integrate his traumatized self and bolster his masculine identity.

## **2. Alcohol and Sexuality in *Love and Sleep: A Romance*.**

Shields notes in interview that O'Reilly depicts his characters in "recognisably Irish drinking cultures." Certainly, alcohol is omnipresent in O'Reilly's novels, particularly *Love and Sleep*, where it is depicted as a ubiquitous social convention. Many studies have observed the interrelationship between alcohol and male gender role ideologies. Kenneth Mullen in his study on "Young Men, Masculinity and Alcohol" concurs that the "use of alcohol and a license to drink to intoxication are deeply rooted in expectations of male behaviour" (Mullen and al. 154). Lemle and Mishkind argue that western culture privileges male use of alcohol, as it "signifies a male's entrance to manhood, and confirms his acceptance among fellow men" (212). Additionally, they argue that connotations of masculinity and alcohol are so inextricable that it is less of a social convention than a social imperative: "Drinking is not merely permitted; it is *prescribed* as a means of affirming masculinity" (213).

Lemle and Mishkind also assert that the "symbolic meaning of drinking as masculine is internalised in childhood" and that a boy's first experience of drinking alcohol is associated with a "rite of passage" into manhood. Further, they argue that a sense of masculinity is compounded when men drink with other men, "It furthers the male image of alcohol and it makes the men

engaged in the activities appear more manly” (214). This is certainly true for characters Danny and Niall, whose long association with each other corresponds to their long association with alcohol. Even as youngsters their friendship consisted of “drinking up back lanes and in derelict houses before we looked old enough to get into pubs” (*Love and Sleep* 25). Niall perceives his friend Danny as attempting to garner his masculine approval as “he regaled me with tales of their drunken antics he thought would amuse and impress me” (*Love and Sleep* 80). Indeed, their renewed acquaintance is immediately consolidated by drinking a bottle of whiskey together. It is only through the consumption of alcohol that the two men are able to communicate on an emotional level without feeling emasculated. In an effort towards ‘male bonding,’ we find “both crying with rage and self-pity” (*Love and Sleep* 17). It is only through the lubricant of alcohol that Danny is able to reveal to Niall the breakup of his engagement: “It had taken him all night to tell me that he had been engaged recently” (*Love and Sleep* 16). In a parody of primal maleness, “He was roaring like an animal” (*Love and Sleep* 17). In a display at once comic and yet touching, Danny reappears covered in mud and stroking his face with flowers (*Love and Sleep* 17). This demonstration of gentleness and vulnerability, perhaps due to its perceived effeminacy, incenses Niall who, “grabbed some of the flowers from him and began to eat them” (*Love and Sleep* 17). The pair then “chewed the flowers and drank them down with the rest of the whiskey” as if trying to suppress the ‘effeminate’ emotions (symbolised by the flowers) that threaten to emasculate them (*Love and Sleep* 17).

Niall’s bouts of drunkenness align with traditionally prescribed masculine gender roles, such as “unconventionality, risk taking and aggressiveness” (Lemle and Mishkind 216). Niall exhibits these traits consistently when he drinks to excess, and many of his casual sexual encounters in the novel are nearly always precipitated by alcohol. When Danny refuses to leave

with Niall and some girls they meet in a bar, Niall becomes aggressive: “His lethargic excuses infuriated me and I lost my temper with him; I was out of my mind on drink” (*Love and Sleep* 28). That night he proceeds to stalk Lorna home, “shouting at everybody”, and remarks, “I was lucky not to get my head kicked in” (*Love and Sleep* 28). In another aggressive incident he is forcibly removed by security as “Screaming with pure rage as they dragged me out of the door, I went on abusing the speaker as though he had insulted me to some unimaginable degree” (*Love and Sleep* 57). Niall’s drunken displays of competitive, masculine aggression may constitute an attempt to compensate for his sense of masculine inadequacy and traumatised anxiety when sober. Lemle and Mishkind have noted that often men who drink addictively are those with the most fragile of masculine identities (222). This is a view reiterated by McCreary, who observes that men who strongly identify with the hegemonic definition of masculinity and consider their own masculinity as threatened, are disposed towards using and abusing alcohol (468).

Although drinking heavily is popularly considered to be manly, overconsumption or the inability to tolerate one’s alcohol intake, however, is considered emasculating (Lemle and Mishkind 214). This is a somewhat paradoxical social expectation of masculine performance; however, it is one of which Niall is all too aware. His self-consciousness about his inability to tolerate drink, its effects and how it is perceived as affecting his masculinity is evident from his reunion with Danny, “I was drunk after a few pints; even then I was morose and made him nervous” (*Love and Sleep* 13). Niall is inebriated and maudlin, emotive and vulnerable while Danny is not, and this deviation from expected masculine behaviour discomfits Danny. Niall passes out from drinking too much in a bar, “When I came round sitting on the street against the wall of the pub Danny was standing guard over me.” He is left in a particularly vulnerable position, so Danny has to protect him (*Love and Sleep* 82). Niall, inebriated, “started sobbing and

couldn't stop." Danny disgusted by his weakness and effeminate display "kept his eyes averted" (*Love and Sleep* 83). This behaviour parallels Wurmser's observation that men who are derided for becoming blatantly intoxicated or becoming addicted to a substance and are therefore unable to control themselves, reflects the larger sociocultural bias that tolerance is associated with masculinity, however "reactivity or dependence is feminine" (40). This leads to a vicious, self-perpetuating cycle as Niall feels emasculated and so drinks alcohol to feel more masculine, however his lack of control and dependence on alcohol makes him feel emasculated.

Along with his first consumption of alcohol, Lemle and Mishkind describe a boy's first sexual encounter as "one of the fundamental activities by which a boy is initiated as a man" (214). Indeed, masculinity and heteronormative sexuality are often described as intrinsically linked, to the extent that some view "sexuality as the ultimate masculine tool" (Philaretou 13). Philaretou refers to "under-masculinised" men, men insecure in their own masculine identity, who "turn towards sex as a viable alternative for proving their masculinity" (129). Many of these men develop what he terms non-clinical male sexual anxiety which he defines as "generalised feelings of sexual unrest experienced by men as a result of their historic-socio-cultural conditioning in the patriarchal masculine ethos" (2).

Niall's obsessive predilection for sex, particularly risky sex, could be interpreted as symptomatic of traits that would categorise him as one trying to compensate for feelings of masculine insecurity and non-clinical sexual anxiety. Philaretou defines non-clinical male sexual anxiety as "the continuous, uncontrollable and intense feelings and thoughts experienced by the person as a result of getting preoccupied with sexual conquests" or "pursuing a sexual relationship for the sake of resolving greater issues of personal loneliness and appropriate boundaries for intimacy" (113). Niall describes feeling overwhelmed by desperate feelings of

loneliness upon his return to Derry, and as he explains to Lorna, “I’m wandering around this city on my own. I don’t know a being” (*Love and Sleep* 11). He forces himself into the relationship: “I tried to convince myself that I found her attractive. I wanted some company other than my own” (*Love and Sleep* 52). Not only is this evidence of Niall’s emasculating feelings of dependency and loneliness, but it also dramatises Philaretou’s description of the symptomology of non-clinical male anxiety, of feeling guilt “for resorting to masturbation, sex with unattractive partners, paid sex, forcing oneself or manipulating a partner into sex” (10). Niall cannot bring himself to be attracted to or feel love for Lorna. He reflects, “She fascinated and appalled me because I didn’t want her – it was impossible to want her” (*Love and Sleep* xiii).

Other symptoms of male sexual anxiety consist of “Feeling restless from constant sexual fantasising and the haunting of sexual thoughts” and experiencing “generalised irritability from not actualising one’s sexual desires” (Philaretou 10). Niall is plagued by these symptoms as even the most innocuous of thoughts can become twisted into violent sexual fantasies. Upon meeting Lorna’s friends Niall comments: “It dawned on me at that moment that I knew nothing about myself or her or anyone else in the upstairs bar; this thought turned me on and I imagined a violent orgy unfolding before me” (*Love and Sleep* 51). Niall becomes fixated on manipulating Lorna into engaging in sexual activity in public places, despite her candid repugnance. As she visits and argues with the owner of a stall selling “Troubles memorabilia” Niall makes pressing sexual overtures, “I put my arms around her and brought my groin against her buttocks... I began to press myself against her” (*Love and Sleep* 91). Despite Lorna’s rejection Niall only becomes increasingly obsessed with sex, as later in the bar he relates “I grabbed her hand and put it on my groin; I couldn’t think of anything but one of us coming” (*Love and Sleep* 94). It is clear that Niall cares nothing for Lorna nor for an emotional and equal sexual connection, only to

dominate and control. Lorna's attempts to placate him only enrage him further, "The tenderness she summoned into her turgid haunted face – I wanted to take my cock out and piss on her" (*Love and Sleep* 94).

This behaviour correlates with male sexual addiction, which Schnarch defines as "a by-product of male sexual identity and has to do with the insatiable desire and longing for the initiation and participation in sexual acts geared at sexual satiation...but with failure to do so" (198). Philaretou suggests that it involves "a voyage of sexual escapades from casual sex with multiple partners and one-night love affairs to initiating intensely eroticised acts" (129). One example of this is Niall's interaction with two (presumably young as he refers to them as "girls") women, both heavily intoxicated. He becomes involved with one of the girls but finds himself unable to get aroused: "Whether it was because I wasn't attracted to her or whether it was the drink, I couldn't get myself hard" (*Love and Sleep* 59). One of the girls is so inebriated she has fallen unconscious, however Niall and her "friend" take her back to the girls' flat and to the bedroom. Niall describes how "she watched me undress her unconscious friend on the bed (I had asked her to masturbate while she watched but she refused outright)" (*Love and Sleep* 60). Niall continues but is unsuccessful: "I couldn't get aroused with either of them, even when I tried to pull myself off over the both of them naked under me" (*Love and Sleep* 60). Despite initiating sex and being in a dominant position, thereby emulating a sexualised masculine ideal, Niall is unable to perform sexually: "I had reached an unbearable level – my frustration was making me sick and filling my head with violent images" (*Love and Sleep* 60). Desperate, Niall goes outside and "knelt between two cars and tried again to come" however, he leaves again "still unsatisfied" (*Love and Sleep* 60). One could argue that this whole episode is initiated by a challenge to his masculinity. In his paranoia he believes that Lorna has disclosed to her friends an incident of his



self-harming, an act of self-loathing he initiates only once precipitated by alcohol abuse. When Lorna denies this he retorts, “You’re lying ... You’re lying. You were all having a great laugh at me” (*Love and Sleep* 57). It is as though Niall feels pressured to constantly assert his masculinity and dominance through sexualised practices or performances that “exemplify him as an active leading agent ... not a passive, submissive follower” (Philaretou 129). In this manner Niall attempts to reassert his masculine identity, only to be unsuccessful, which leads to further feelings of emasculation.

Philaretou suggests that for some men, “It is as if the intensity of their sexual experiences with women acts as a booster of their damaged masculine self-esteem” (13). This is particularly relevant in his casual sexual relationship with a woman he refers to as “The American girl” (*Love and Sleep* 124), whose comparable lack of sexual mores excites Niall. The American girl becomes sexually aroused by hearing of other people’s misery. Niall initially excites her by talking about the man who committed suicide: “I brought myself to tears without trying” (*Love and Sleep* 124). When the American tells Niall of a young homeless drug addict she met, who in addition to being disowned by her family and having a daughter, “had been raped and beaten” Niall asks her, “Did you come?” (*Love and Sleep* 125) The American admits “that she had become wet but had stopped herself in time” (*Love and Sleep* 125). Observing Niall’s unhappiness she attempts to relieve him by performing oral sex on the edge of a cliff: “when she finally let me come, one of my feet was dangling over the edge of the cliff and the rocks below and I was hanging onto her hair for dear life” (*Love and Sleep* 125). O’Reilly depicts Niall as numb and unable to perform sexually unless stimulated to the very extreme by not only sex, but danger.

Sexuality has social and political ramifications particularly in Northern Ireland. Sexuality can be politically charged, even dangerous, it can be a form of protest and rebellion. Caroline Magennis notes of Robert McLiam Wilson's philandering protagonists, the eponymous Ripley Bogle and Jake Jackson from *Eureka Street* that sexuality can be used to position and construct a masculinity that contests traditionalist masculine discourse in Northern Ireland (*SOU* 54). She suggests that both characters utilise "the erotic high-style" espoused by Bogle as an act of subversion, demarcating them as other from the Northern Irish mainstream and essentially "queering" their masculinities (*SOU* 55). She employs the term 'queer' to refer to "identities that are mutable, capricious, shifting" (*SOU* 55). Niall too could be seen to utilise sexuality in a similarly subversive manner. Niall perceives his father, and men of his father's generation, as marked by "caution and meanness" and puritanical like the purifier (*Love and Sleep* 23). Niall cries out at his father's grave, "Did you ever know a sigh of pleasure? Did you ever lose all hope for yourself on my mother's breasts?" (*Love and Sleep* 139). Sean O'Reilly is well aware that in Northern Ireland there is still a conservative, moralistic attitude towards sexuality, as he states in interview, "Sexuality remains the great unacknowledged topic in Irish writing" (Murphy). Thus, one may perceive the overt sexuality of O'Reilly's protagonist as a form of rebellion against conservative masculine ideals espoused within Northern Ireland as a whole. Niall sets himself up in direct counterpoint to his father, who he views as self-contained, controlled and sexless, by behaving as the very antithesis of these traits. In the same manner that Magennis notes of the abortion scenes in *Ripley Bogle*, breaking taboos may be an attempt by the author to distance themselves "from elements of Northern Irish society, particularly the parochial and conservative" (*SOU* 28). This, then, is perhaps O'Reilly's attempt to articulate and construct a masculine identity at odds with the mainstream, embodied by the loyal and monogamous Danny.

There is also in Northern Ireland a direct relation between sex and violence. The most overt example of this in the novel is during a section dealing with a riot in which Niall becomes embroiled. He observes a teenager “masturbating in front of the line of police...he held a petrol bomb in his other hand which a boy of about ten was trying to set alight” (*Love and Sleep* 135). This onanistic tableau emblematises ideas of aggressive masculinity and territorialism, in an almost primal, animalistic display. Engaging in masturbation with one hand while holding a petrol bomb in the other seems to symbolise the volatile and violent nature of male sexuality. Niall describes the “sickened cheer as the teenager finally managed to make himself come in the forlorn alluvium of no-mans-land” (*Love and Sleep* 137). The boy is taken by fellow rioters and beaten: “we heard him screaming a few minutes later” (*Love and Sleep* 137). The riot is tinged with uncontrollable, almost sexual excitement as “young girls flitted about in their nightdresses” and “a three-legged dog barked and pissed itself with excitement” (*Love and Sleep* 136). During the vivid description of violence Niall disrupts the temporality of the narrative to weave in a memory of sexual intercourse with Lorna, particularly notable as the only example of sexual satisfaction with her in the novel. On the verge of violence, he relates how “I had kicked in the door of the bathroom and found Lorna” (*Love and Sleep* 136). Lorna decides to apply make-up to Niall, to which he agrees: “as she was painting my eyes and lips, I pulled down the straps of her dress and played with her nipples” (*Love and Sleep* 136). Niall describes how Lorna “decorated my cock with lipstick... She tried to resist when I lifted her dress but I pushed her against the sink and went into her from behind – the make-up stains like blood on her buttocks” (*Love and Sleep* 136). The application of make-up in this instance is arguably less effeminate than ritualistic, like tribal war paint. The act of penetrating her from behind as she started to protest and the lipstick “blood” on her buttocks could be interpreted as a symbolic rape (perhaps

even the rape of a virgin), the ultimate enactment of male dominance. Niall then resumes the narrative in the midst of the riot. Caught up in the violence he is “disappointed to see only about ten teenagers at the front-line leading the disorder” (*Love and Sleep* 136). He notes that despite this all members of the community are present: “young men drinking cans of beer and looking around at the girls, a few women chatting ...” (*Love and Sleep* 136). This suggests not only normalisation of violence for the people of Derry, and by extension Northern Ireland, in that it has been assimilated into their lives. But the violence also has a communal or tribal aspect, one Niall finds himself caught up in, “Picking up whatever was to hand, I ran towards the police, delighting in each thump of the stone against their ice-like shields” (*Love and Sleep* 136). Again, the violent excitement takes on sexual connotations: “my glamorised cock was stiff in my trousers” (*Love and Sleep* 137).

This is not the only example of sex and violence conflating within the novel. Lorna details to Niall an event in her childhood that has scarred her for life. She describes how a man touched her shoulder and asked her to stay still: “I felt this hard thing on my shoulder. He was kneeling down behind me and he keeps whispering to me not to move...He was touching my hip and I thought I was going to faint ...” (*Love and Sleep* 40). Niall, and through his unreliable narration the reader, labours under the misapprehension that Lorna has been sexually molested by this man, and when he mentions this towards the end of the novel Lorna shouts, “He had a bloody gun on my shoulder” (*Love and Sleep* 134). She explains, “He used me as a ... to lean on. This woman coming down the other side of the street wheeling a pram. She just fell against a wall ... Then a red stain” (*Love and Sleep* 134). Niall has confused this violent shooting with sexuality. However, the connection remains, as the young woman with the pram is shot because of her sexuality: “she was supposed to be going out with a soldier” explains Lorna (*Love and*

*Sleep* 134). In Northern Ireland during the Troubles even the most basic and ‘normal’ expression of sexuality could be dangerous and punished if it entailed a liaison with members from the ‘wrong’ community. Indeed, there is a sense of communal complicity as Lorna adds, “None of them ever said a word about it. They bought me an ice cream and no one ever asked me if I was OK” (*Love and Sleep* 134). It is this confession that precipitates Niall’s recollection of the riot and his sexual congress with Lorna. It is quite evident, then, that for Niall, sex and violence have become intrinsically linked.

Niall does not display the hyper-masculine bravado or macho ‘hard man’ tendencies prevalent in cinema and literature of the Troubles, such as featured in McNamee’s *Resurrection Man* or *The Ultras*. He deliberately makes different choices than men like his father. Despite coming from a working-class Nationalist background he chooses to leave Derry to pursue an education in England, a choice which alienates him from both his father and his brother. As Martina asks, “How can they make sense of changes like that, Niall?” (*Love and Sleep* 5). Niall’s choice to pursue an education and leave the country demonstrates that he is establishing an alternative masculine identity to that embodied by his father and brother. One may infer that there is an expectation, particularly of men, to stay within their communities, as have Niall’s father and brother, to adhere to the societal subtext of masculine protector. This is demonstrated in the interaction between Niall and Martina, wherein Niall asserts that there is nothing for him to come back for in Derry, and Martina admonishes, “God forgive you. These are your own people” (*Love and Sleep* 5). Niall, however, rejects this: “I’ll decide who my own people are, I said bombastically, or if I even want a people” (*Love and Sleep* 5). Implicit in this statement is Niall’s rejection of the doctrine of masculinist Nationalism. He feels neither a connection to what is perceived as ‘his’ community nor does he bear any responsibility for them. This is a view he

reiterates to Lorna later in the novel. When she asks “But don’t you feel any responsibility?” Niall retorts, “Responsibility for what? This place did nothing for me. All it did was to leave me feeling guilty if I wanted anything more than misery and a few pints” (*Love and Sleep* 103). Niall does, however, return to Derry, the site of his trauma. Yet he does so traumatised by and isolated from the prevailing masculine ethos. Disenfranchised and suffering from the emasculating effects of traumatic symptomology, Niall pours himself into an extreme parody of the masculine performances prescribed by society. But in adhering to these prescriptions Niall becomes yet more emasculated. However, in doing so Niall is adhering to the cultural conventions of a country as broken as he is. Vickroy argues that the social environment is of paramount importance to those suffering from trauma, that “environmental contingences are crucial to behaviour” (131). Niall’s behaviour reflects Vickroy’s position that “Cultural attitudes and practices influence notions of expected behaviour, responses and even symptoms” (132). Niall’s response to trauma is indicative not only of his psychological state, but that of Northern Irish society at that time.

### **3. Trauma, Community and Masculinity**

Niall is not the only character suffering from the effects of trauma in the novel. Every character, no matter how tangential to the story, displays symptoms of trauma. This reflects the ubiquity of the suffering and trauma caused by the Troubles in Northern Ireland, experienced on both the individual and collective levels. While Lorna’s death serves as the trigger for Danny’s mental breakdown and hospitalisation, he is depicted as already traumatised by his dysfunctional family. Arguably they too are victims of the trauma of the Troubles; his mother is an alcoholic while his father barely recognises his son’s existence. Danny is humiliated by their behaviour, however

when Niall asks “Are you all right? ... You don’t look it” Danny stoically says nothing, in order to conform to traditional masculine expectations (*Love and Sleep* 84).

Niall’s own family is similarly depressed and traumatised. As Martina explains to Niall, “I’m a woman with a husband and a child ... a depressed husband and a child who won’t eat” (*Love and Sleep* 45). Niall’s uncle, formerly in the IRA, now feels disenfranchised, particularly since the announcement of the IRA ceasefire, and “has taken to his caravan and a soft-hearted but determined alcoholism” (*Love and Sleep* 119). No character in the novel, whether principal or peripheral, is immune from trauma and anguish, from the nameless man whose suicide preludes the narrative, the former Creggan teacher now a “wino” spoken of only in overheard conversation, to one of Niall’s one-night paramours, who is found in a toilet “banging her head against the cistern” (83). Lorna too is clearly traumatised and tries to articulate the deadening impact the Troubles has had on her painting. She has been creatively stifled by the violence: “The eighties in Belfast were... What were you supposed to paint? For who? Your own nightmares. In blood” (*Love and Sleep* 70). O’Reilly is depicting an entire society suffering from trauma, moreover a society wherein suffering is normalised, even trivialised. As O’Reilly himself says about his own upbringing in an interview for *The Independent*, “It seemed normal. Then you noticed things were not normal. You could be walking up the town with your ma and she would be strip-searched by the army” (Bielenberg). As the trauma of the Troubles quickly becomes commonplace only the most extreme experiences stand out. Danny is quick to dismiss Niall’s experiences of the Troubles saying, “You never saw anything. A bit of broken glass maybe” (*Love and Sleep* 101). While there are plenty of extreme examples of bombings and shootings, the trauma from which Niall, and the larger community in Northern Ireland, suffers is more akin to the “pervasive, *insidious*” and cumulative trauma postulated by Maria Root. Indeed

in his work on collective or communal trauma, Erikson capitalises upon the idea of cumulative trauma as the very definition of communal trauma. He asserts that “collective trauma works its way slowly and even *insidiously* into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with ‘trauma’” (188).

If we look specifically at sectarian violence, mostly featured peripherally in the novel, we can comprehend the nature and pervasiveness of the normalisation of violence in the country. There is, for example, Niall’s casual observation that, “behind the bushes of a house up the street, I spotted a soldier on his knees, with the gun close to his camouflaged face” (*Love and Sleep* 65). He watches the soldiers progress in formation down the street, hiding behind the bushes without any obvious concern, and notes with surprise that “it struck me that there were green buds along the branches” (*Love and Sleep* 65). This statement illustrates that it is more “natural” for Niall to see soldiers camouflaged in the greenery than it is to see nature itself, which is exemplary of the prevailing societal attitude in Northern Ireland, one that differentiates it from non-conflict countries.

This is further exemplified by Lorna’s embarrassment at fleeing a violent demonstration. Despite being struck on the head and bleeding she reflects that, “She felt stupid now for panicking and wished she had stayed on to see what happened” (*Love and Sleep* 68). Comparably, we have Danny’s sense of emasculation when he declares that he has no intention of intervening if some organisation wants to bomb the hotel he is working in. Niall remarks, “He thought it was important to convince me that he wasn’t a coward if he didn’t do everything in his power to safeguard the building” (*Love and Sleep* 61). These examples demonstrate how the effects of the Troubles are deeply rooted in the Northern Irish consciousness. Of particular note, of course, is the community’s reaction to the violent shooting in which Lorna played an



unwilling part: “None of them ever said a word about it. They bought me an ice cream and no one ever asked me if I was OK” (*Love and Sleep* 134). Lorna’s disgust with “her” community’s reaction reflects further damage done by a communal trauma, one which involves “a gradual realisation that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared” (Erikson 189). Niall and Lorna’s sense of alienation could be indicative of the fracturing of the ‘cells’, or indeed *selves*, of the community. Kai Erikson explains that “although the “I” and the “you” still exist “the ‘we’ implied no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body” (190). He notes that in communities traumatised by disasters, these events “seem to force open whatever fault lines once ran silently through the structure of the larger community, dividing it into divisive fragments” (190), then quotes Freudenberg and Jones’s observation that these divisions can become so deep and fractious that they evoke “corrosive communities” (190). From this we may discern that communal trauma operates on several levels, impacting not only the ties that bind people together in social groups, but the creation, often maladaptive, of “social climates, communal moods, that come to dominate a group’s spirit” (Erikson 190).

Lorna’s commentary on the state of mental health in Derry is particularly illuminating, “The whole city’s on a wave of Prozac, everybody I know’s on it. An acceptable level of intoxication” (*Love and Sleep* 93). Lorna’s character goes on to make an exceptionally insightful and profound observation on gender, particularly within Northern Ireland, that “The men all die young and the women go to the doctor” (*Love and Sleep* 93). This has numerous, multifaceted social ramifications and interpretations within a Northern Irish context. On one level there is a simple correlation to the violence of the Troubles in which men represented, by far, the larger number of victims. Moreover, the end of the Troubles after the Good Friday agreement also saw

a surge in suicide, particularly amongst men, and this is clearly an outcome of male socialisation in regard to issues of health and wellbeing. Male gender proscriptions mean men are less likely to admit vulnerability or discuss issues of mental health with their doctors as discussing feelings is perceived as a feminine trait. This is evidenced in Danny's rebuttal of Niall's exhortation to talk about what is wrong with him: "We don't all have to blabber everything out to everybody" (*Love and Sleep* 84). Once more Niall's constant stream of consciousness is another example of how he does not fit within the parameters of expected masculine behaviour.

One could argue that this 'masculinised' attitude towards seeking help for mental health issues was a prevailing societal attitude in Northern Ireland during and after the Troubles. This is encapsulated in Danny's comment to Niall at the end of the novel: "He calls me a smithereen, who must now forget that there was ever an explosion" (*Love and Sleep* 198). There is a sense here that survivors of the conflict in Northern Ireland are collateral damage and that despite their traumatic experiences they are expected to put the past behind them. Likewise, as regards his masculinity, Niall is expected to stoically repress his emotions, not to discuss them and to simply forget that the traumatic 'explosion' of the Troubles ever happened. The idea that he should somehow internalise his experiences and move on is also implied in the advice from the man in the café in the prologue to the novel. Niall reads this man Danny's letter (referred to in both prologue and epilogue of the novel), after which the man "tore the letter into pieces and dropped them in my drink ... 'That's my advice', he said. 'Drink it'" (*Love and Sleep* xvi). Societal attitudes are hugely relevant as the social environment "not only forms the circumstances out of which trauma is created but can also provide or refuse the needed support for healing" (Vickroy 132). Root argues that victims of trauma, when placed in an unsympathetic, maladapted social environment may display the "egocentrism, quickness to anger, social and emotional withdrawal,

rumination or shutting down” so characteristic of O’Reilly’s protagonist (248). Root’s notion of insidious trauma is pertinent here, especially to issues such as male gender socialisation, as it can have particularly debilitating effects on the construction of masculinity. Furthermore, Niall experiences these gender expectations within the microcosm of a trauma-producing environment such as Northern Ireland, a hyper-masculine society that is both traumatised and traumatising, in a way that is arguably distinctly Northern Irish.

#### **4. Masculinity and Betrayal in *The Swing of Things***

Noel Boyle, a former IRA member and prisoner of Maghaberry prison, released early as part of the Good Friday Agreement, at first seems to personify the traditional Nationalist masculinity within the typically sectarian discourse of Northern Ireland. However, the depiction of Boyle in the *Swing of Things* is much more complicated and indeed subversive. Chronically insecure, Noel is vulnerable and desperate to fit in. Like Niall, he continually struggles to conform to masculine expectations, to set the past behind him and, as the title of the novel implies, to get into the swing of things. Issues of masculinity predominate throughout the novel, evident not only in Noel’s attempt to renegotiate his identity from ex-paramilitary into post-conflict philosophy student at Trinity College, but in his self-perceived failure to adhere to societally prescribed masculine roles. Furthermore, one may discern a *leitmotif* of betrayal, as Noel is betrayed not only by each of his male friends, but by the very Northern Irish fraternities of which he thought himself a part.

Although ostensibly there is a linear narrative structure and less chronological dissonance than is evident in O’Reilly’s previous novel, like *Love and Sleep* before it, *The Swing of Things* also utilises many of the narrative stylistics characteristic of trauma fiction. From the outset there is a sense of self-consciousness in the repeated, almost self-referential tone of the narrative. The

novel opens with the implied third person extradiegetic narrator inviting the reader to “Call him Boyle” (*TSOT* 1), “Call him Noel Boyle” and “Say this is Dublin” (*TSOT* 3). This is indicative of how narrative in trauma fiction may be “taken literally, defamiliarised, or used self-consciously” (Vice 4). The narrative too, as in *Love and Sleep*, alternates between the conscious and unconscious minds of the characters and protagonist. Reality, dream and hallucination segue into one another so seamlessly that at times it is impossible to differentiate. This reflects the traumatised characters’ increasing inability to differentiate between these states, as reality and unreality merge into one homogenised traumatic experience. This is an example of what Whitehead refers to as testing the formal boundaries and limitations of narrative, which may also “convey the damaging and distorting impact of the traumatic event” (81).

Whitehead observes that trauma fiction incorporates “intertextuality, repetition and a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice” (84). *The Swing of Things* is redolent with intertextual allusions. O’Reilly’s foreward includes a direct quotation from J.P. Donleavy’s *The Ginger Man*, a novel depicting the picaresque Sebastian Dangerfield, struggling law student in Dublin University, and his drunken and debauched sexual misadventures in Dublin. This has obvious parallels with O’Reilly’s text, both protagonists being students in Dublin. Furthermore, Boyle and his dissolute companion Fada find themselves in a series of dark and disturbing encounters, fuelled by alcohol and drugs.

O’Reilly’s intertextuality includes both direct and indirect references to numerous poets, for example Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “A Vision of Connaught in the Thirteenth Century” in Fada’s “I sought the hall, and behold – a change from light to darkness” (*TSOT* 300). One of the few mainstream theorists to address O’Reilly’s work is Geraldine Meaney, who incorporates a chapter on O’Reilly in her text *Gender, Ireland and Cultural Change*. She notes examples of

Yeatsian intertextuality in Fada's paraphrase of "Leda and the Swan" and "The Wild Swans at Coole," "They flew up from the lake, he says, I saw them gathering last night. Forty, fifty of them. A shudder in their loins. Their hearts don't grow old" (*TSOT* 300). The inverted imagery of rape in Fada's reference to "Leda and the Swan" as he is the male who is raped, Davey argues, is a metaphor for colonisation and the subsequent effeminisation of Irish masculinity (Davey 20).

Stylistically, as well as thematically, it could be argued that O'Reilly's novel predominantly parallels the work of Joyce. Meaney refers to O'Reilly as "one of the most self-consciously Joycean of contemporary Irish novelists" (127). Meaney perceives Boyle as an amalgamation of Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, but judges Boyle as having "even less chance than Stephen Dedalus of awakening from the nightmare of history" (129). Intertextuality, particularly in trauma fiction, establishes literary precedent, textual and thematic echoes that haunt the text, and lends a sense of fate or determinism. In this case, by borrowing from works which foreground threats to masculinity, such as Yeats's "Leda and the Swan", and the impossibility of escaping one's past, as in Joyce's *Ulysses*, O'Reilly sets the tone and presages the climax of the novel. Meaney comments that O'Reilly's novel features "the Joycean trope of betrayal" (129), referencing Boyle's betrayal by Fada. In fact, as this chapter contends, the theme of betrayal dominates the text and is always contextualised within the framework of masculinity and fraternity. It could be argued that the manner in which O'Reilly utilises intertextuality within the novel reinforces the work as trauma fiction.

If the characters in *Love and Sleep* are suffering from insidious trauma, then Boyle conforms to the more typically Freudian model of trauma employed by Caruthian analysts. While Boyle has also suffered from insidious trauma, his trauma is compounded by his arrest and

subsequent stay in HM Prison Maze (referred to in the novel as Long Kesh). Boyle displays many of the criteria of psychogenic post-traumatic stress disorder, and these symptoms, as is typical of trauma fiction, then inform the narrative. The World Health Organisation defines the disorder as “a delayed or protracted response to a stressful event or situation (either short- or long-lasting) of an exceptionally threatening or catastrophic nature” (“ICD 10 Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders”). This response takes the form of “repetitive, intrusive recollection or re-enactment of the event in memories, daytime imagery, or dreams” possibly involving flashbacks or hallucinations (Caruth 4). Boyle suffers from these intrusive memories throughout the novel. At one point, influenced by alcohol, he tells a young woman of his past; however, he is unable to cope with the emotional repercussions. He “ran till the shame was shaken out of him, and for a few days after at least, every memory, every word” (*TSOT* 25). This type of trauma leads to states of hypervigilance and hyperarousal, yet at the same time exists within a state of conspicuous emotional detachment and feelings of being emotionally numb (“ICD 10 Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders”). Boyle describes himself as “like a man with a hangover, who can’t bear the noise of an ordinary day, out of sync, easily startled” (*TSOT* 105), all of which is indicative of his sense of alienation and is suggestive of the “exaggerated startle response” associated with traumatological pathology (WHO 1992). As Boyle himself notes, “He couldn’t shake the lethargy, the indifference, the sudden attacks of panic” (*TSOT* 107). Boyle’s triggering traumatic event is surely his arrest, physically life threatening, emotionally wounding, not only to his self-identity but also to his masculinity.

In angry outburst Boyle overturns a table selling macabre death masks of a recently deceased Russian woman, hearing men approach, he flees from the scene. As he runs, memories of his past flood back to him, including the moments before his arrest when he ran through fields

trying to escape the omnipresent army flying overhead in a helicopter. Boyle had been in charge of driving the local mobile library van to transport “the most precious of all precious, an armour piercing yoke” to an IRA safe house (*TSOT* 92). What was supposed to be “an easy run” is complicated when the conspirators encounter a checkpoint, evidence that they have been betrayed. Boyle remembers how he “had fled at the first sign of the checkpoint, turning the mobile library off the road into a field” and running for his life, leaving his erstwhile comrade Sock McKinney in the van. The almost psychopathic, hyper-masculine Sock is laughing, kicking open the van doors to shoot at police and screaming at Boyle, “They’re not fucken getting it you chicken cunt” (*TSOT* 92). The narrative reflects Boyle’s own confusion over the event, as it is not presented in a linear fashion, rather the memory is fragmented, and the temporal flow is disjointed, interrupted and interspersed with Sock’s aspersions that Boyle is a coward. As the shooting starts in earnest Boyle runs and the present and past coincide, the pace of the narrative increasing to match both his stride and the barrage of returned memories. Ellipses denote the conjoining of past and present, “... now there was the helicopter coming down over his head and they were knocking out the window to him, waving, blowing kisses, the camouflaged faces, they could piss down on him running across another field” (*TSOT* 92). Boyle has no control, he perceives the army as mocking his sexuality, blowing kisses, compounding his feelings of emasculation as he runs in terror for his life. He yearns for the moment to be over, “waiting for the shot that would bring him down, the finger in the back, the knock on the nut, running towards it, ready for it, and it never came, there was no mercy, there was no fuckin mercy” (*TSOT* 92). Boyle is captured and incarcerated, known as a coward for his behaviour, rather than being killed by the army and idealised as a martyred Nationalist soldier who sacrificed his life for the cause. His trauma is compounded by its inherent attack on his masculinity. Unlike Sock, who stays to

fight the police and the army, encapsulating the actions of the hyper-masculine Nationalist ideal, Boyle runs at the first sign of trouble, abandoning his fellow IRA comrade and the cargo he is transporting, all of which seriously undermines his sense of masculinity.

In addition to the trauma of his arrest, Boyle's incarceration in prison may be viewed as another site of trauma. Increasing academic research has proven that incarceration is in itself traumatic and can lead to issues of post-traumatic stress, particularly among those inmates with traumatic histories. This is alluded to in advice booklets Boyle is provided with by the jail counsellors upon release that "mentioned extreme paranoia, hyperventilation and depression", typically symptomatic of PTSD (*TSOT* 27). He refers to his struggle with these symptoms early in the novel: "There it was again in full bloom: paranoia... *Flora convictus extremicus*" (*TSOT* 16). His pseudo-Latinate play on words could be interpreted as the extreme flora or flower of the convicts. "The leaflets say it could last years" he expounds, "You're walking down the street and suddenly you are convinced somebody is following you. Or a car. Or a helicopter..." (*TSOT* 16). Indeed, Boyle is consumed by paranoia, "He set up a tripwire in the hall every night" and "began making notes of the cars that passed the window" (*TSOT* 106). This hypervigilant behaviour is demonstrative of the pathology of post-traumatic stress disorder.

A particularly appropriate example, not only of the depth of Boyle's pathology, but also of the narrative conventions of trauma fiction, occurs later in the novel in Trinity library. His verbose and bombastic stream of consciousness is interrupted suddenly by "automatic shiny bars sliding down over windows. Alarms started squealing primed at an intolerable pitch" (*TSOT* 219). Boyle panics "He put his hands in the air, shouting: I'm unarmed ... innocent" (*TSOT* 219). He sees smoke everywhere, a body lying at his feet, and people in white masks and academic gowns "carrying guns, handguns and Armalites" (*TSOT* 219). One points a gun at



Boyle and he is paralyzed by fear “Help us, she said. ‘Show us the fucken way out of here you coward’. Blood was tricking down her neck from under the mask...” (*TSOT* 219). As the narrative unfolds it emerges that Boyle has experienced a panic attack, a hallucination provoked by “the security barrier which was triggered” by the books in Boyle’s bag (*TSOT* 219). Boyle had previously noted that the library was a “maze of shelves” and in his attack he sees smoke in “the avenues of the maze” (*TSOT* 219), echoing the name of the prison in which he was incarcerated, HM Prison Maze. The accusation of cowardice and his impulse to run is a repetition of the traumatic memory of his arrest. Repetition, the key narrative feature of trauma fiction, here symbolises Boyle’s inability to escape his past. Boyle’s confusion is adeptly reflected on a narrative level, as there is no typographical cue to signal any break from reality. Rather the action of the novel flows continuously, so the narrative dissonance in the appearance of prison bars, shots and smoke is as disorientating for the reader as it is for Boyle. As for Boyle, there is no immediate relief here, no automatic return to ‘reality’ at the end of the event. Instead the narrative becomes even more obfuscating, shifting narrative perspectives mid-sentence from Boyle’s to Larry the library assistant’s. This has a jarring effect and leaves the reader, like Boyle, confused and uncertain as to what constitutes reality.

One may assume that feelings of fear, vulnerability and self-doubt are debilitating to one’s construction of masculinity. Those traumatic events which have shaped Boyle have systematically undermined his sense of autonomy and masculinity. This carries over into his daily life, in which he perceives himself as a failure in his own expectations of masculinity. He berates himself for being unable to seduce a fellow classmate he calls the Dove. He feels inadequate, lacking the stereotypically masculine traits of confidence, bravery, domination,

remarking that, “He is a coward; the Dove was waiting for him to take control, to show her what he wanted” (*TSOT* 95).

Boyle feels intrinsically at odds with the examples of masculinity he was exposed to as a child, blighted by his experience growing up in the Troubles in Derry. Yet without alternative models of masculinity, Boyle instead attempts to emulate the paramilitary “saviours” who “shivered with legendary duty ... covered their mouths and ran into the smoke” of riots and gun battles. It appears a natural progression, then, that when the time comes he, literally as well as metaphorically, follows in their footsteps, running “into the smoke, screaming no words” (*TSOT* 111).

Yet it is clear Boyle yearns for an alternative expression of masculinity, describing to the Dove that he used to dream “of finding a new dictionary buried in the forest and the run home with it in his jumper, the new language, the spell that would bring back death” (*TSOT* 111). This new language that would enable him to articulate new forms of masculinity, and would spell death for the outmoded, martyred and undying representations of Nationalist masculinity. Instead, however, Boyle forces himself to conform to that ideal, manifested by men like Sock, and ultimately feels inadequate by comparison. Boyle seems aware on some level of his feelings of masculine insecurity, and how they have adversely affected his life. He explains to Dove that the path of his life has been paved with stones, the stones signifying major life events: “There was the growing up stone, the Hunger Strike stone, the joining-up stone, the first-arrest stone, the sentence stone ...” (*TSOT* 110). Although Nationalist women also participated in these “coming of age” events, they are the norm, a series of predominantly, if not ubiquitously, masculine rites of passage. The imagery O’Reilly uses, in particular the metaphor of stones, is multifaceted. Not only do these stones, these masculine rites of passage unique to Northern Ireland, signify paving

the way for his eventual arrest and incarceration, but they also serve as emotional weights. Stones are also the tool of the rioter, as implied in the lines, “Once a pocketful of stones used to take the weight off the heart. The people tore up the streets in search of death” (*TSOT* 112). In many ways Boyle has chosen the path of the stone, the path of masculine violence, not because he wanted to, but because he felt he had no alternative. However, he realises that this is a path of no return, remarking that these stones “did not make a path back” (*TSOT* 110). Boyle looks at the men in Dublin and the masculinity they embody with undisguised envy: “Dublin men at their ease, proud to survey the things their fathers had passed down to them, men with a past they were glad to talk about” (*TSOT* 27). He is, to an extent, cognisant that the masculinity of Northern Irish society is stunting and suffocating. He feels “it was all a trick, the whole prison system, all the prisoners, the guards, the armed struggle, and it was there to fool him, to prevent him from finding out something” (*TSOT* 39). In a Northern Ireland he perceives as dominated by the stereotypes of masculinity, he struggles to find “something,” that something, an expression of alternative masculinity, a model to which he could relate and feel a part.

Boyle tries to follow the path of the paramilitary, the path of the political prisoner, however he is patently at odds with and alienated from these fraternities. As a member of the IRA he was, as his friend Dainty puts it, “small fry” only trusted with the least taxing jobs, “They wouldn’t let you near a gun” (*TSOT* 106). Each of his paramilitary jobs was bungled, and in his final mission he runs away and is condemned as a coward. An unsuccessful paramilitary, Boyle proves an equally unsuccessful political prisoner. On his second night in HM Prison Maze, Boyle along with several newcomers are the victims of a prank, a pseudo-initiation ritual orchestrated by their fellow inmates. Told to search for an escape tunnel in the prison kitchen while crawling on their bellies, the new prisoners are suddenly interrupted as the lights go on and

prison guards appear. As everyone around him laughs, Boyle is the last to realise this has been a practical joke and “What was worse: Boyle had pissed himself from fright” (*TSOT* 139). Prison, however, gives him time to pursue other interests such as philosophy, which only becomes another point of contention between Boyle and the other prisoners. Perceived as more interested in Immanuel Kant than Nationalist politics or idealism, other inmates nickname him “Buddha.” Failing to fit in with the prevailing masculine prescription, after one year of incarceration Boyle applies for a transfer to Maghaberry Prison to be classified a ‘normal’ rather than political prisoner.

This is almost certainly why, upon his release, and his failure to assimilate into the community in Derry, Boyle endeavours to make a new life for himself in Dublin: “He was going to try his best to change his life” (*TSOT* 24). Like Joyce’s Dedalus, who wishes to escape from the moral and religious dogma of his past, Boyle too wishes to escape his personal history and choices. However, he soon discovers that university is not the place that will give him answers, “the great dialogues he had hoped for ... were simply not part of the deal” (*TSOT* 103). Indeed, deemed too intellectual to be a prisoner, Boyle is deemed too much the prisoner to be an intellectual. Even as a mature student, Boyle does not fit into the student community. Considered a “shifty man” by the library assistant, Boyle feels dislocated, out of place. He “had lost his way and he knew it” (*TSOT* 10). He is an observer, set apart from the student body “spying out the window on the life of the students sitting ... like children at a paddling pool” (*TSOT* 10). Trinity increasingly loses its lustre for Boyle. The study of philosophy that gave him hope, a way to contextualise his life and experiences becomes pointless as, “The books that had once opened like windows into new places were all an illusion, moral fables against getting above yourself, stepping out of line, fighting back, wanting more, changing yourself” (*TSOT* 103). This idea of

“getting above yourself” has linguistic and thematic parallels with *Love and Sleep*. It is as if these characters perceive that not only is there no alternative to the society’s ideologies of masculinity, but that one cannot rise above or escape the trauma of one’s life. This evokes the essence of *Weiderholungszwang*, of repetition, inherent to Caruth’s abreactive trauma paradigm. Far from personal or intellectual freedom, Boyle finds himself just as imprisoned in Trinity as he had been in the Maze, “he sniffed the same staleness around him as in every cell he had moved between” (*TSOT* 103). Utterly defeated Boyle acknowledges, “Another failure. He was more alone now that at any time before because he had lost hope” (*TSOT* 103).

Indeed, it is to the violent hypermasculinity to which Boyle seems condemned to return, albeit against his conscious desires. Boyle and Fada are stalked one evening by a group of men responsible for viciously attacking Fada on another occasion. Boyle feels trapped, whether by fate or fatalism, “Boyle thought no. It was an attempt to pray. I didn’t ask to be here. This is not my doing” (*TSOT* 235). A fight inevitably occurs and Boyle, reacting with his paramilitary training, thinks “Never hesitate” (*TSOT* 235). Boyle runs towards the would-be attackers, Fada in the background iterating periphrastic encouragement. At first, he utilises what could be described as necessary force, however, when attacked by surprise and from behind, Boyle responds automatically holding “the fucker by the neck with one hand and pounding the face with the other until he let him go and the arsehole lay draped across the river wall” (*TSOT* 235). Boyle glances at Fada to see him “standing in silence...his hands in the air as if he was being searched” which seems to provoke Boyle who then, looking back at the student, simply “took him by the ankles and tipped him up over the wall” and into the Liffey, drowning the young man (*TSOT* 235).

The act itself seems inexplicable and is never explained within the narrative. It is only referred to once retrospectively in the novel by Boyle himself, yet he is unable to account for his motivations, saying only, “I just lost it for a split second. There were frustrations building up in me, frustrations and anger” (*TSOT* 253). It is perhaps possible that Fada’s stance, that of surrender when being searched, so recognisable and significant to Boyle in context of the trauma of his arrest and imprisonment, might have triggered his actions. The moment is similar to the way the ‘maze’ in the library contributed to Boyle’s hallucinatory panic attack. Feelings of being trapped, of surrender and of emasculation, could have provoked his actions, murder being the ultimate act of domination. That is not to say his actions are justified, only that in O’Reilly’s narrative at least, agency is denied him, and the return to violence inescapable.

The murder is an event of narrative and thematic apotheosis in the novel, signalling the end to one chapter of Boyle’s life, as well as concluding “Part One” of the novel. The act serves as a narrative catalyst as from this point on Boyle is systematically betrayed by each of his male friends. The first betrayal comes from his fair-weather friend Fada. An interesting character, the dissolute Fada earns his living as a street performer in Dublin hawking renditions of classic Irish literature, “I’ll take you turf cutting with Heaney or onion eating with Jonathan Swift, lamenting the earls with O’Leary ... Bobby Sands and Lady Gregory” (*TSOT* 17). This crass commercialisation of literary greats and martyred political prisoners symbolises not only Celtic Tiger’s consumerism, as Meaney adroitly asserts, but also what was an increasingly pervasive attitude in the North to capitalise on the Troubles. This also serves as a source of disconnect for Boyle, as it highlights the dichotomy between the romanticised free Ireland for which he had ostensibly been fighting and the base consumerist ideals for which it is now exploited.

Fada's propensity towards loquacious oratories, and his emasculating dependence on alcohol and promiscuity, mark him as unhinged, and perhaps effeminate. Fada is, after all, a man "who would try to convince you he was sexually abused by a swan" (*TSOT* 241). Boyle has an ambivalent relationship with Fada; he is attracted to his unique expression of masculinity yet simultaneously repulsed by his lack of typically Northern Irish, stereotypical masculinity. Boyle remarks that "Fada was somebody whom he would not have encountered in Derry. This was a new experience, what he wanted" (*TSOT* 136). Fada offers an alternative to the modes of masculinity to which Boyle has become accustomed, however Boyle scorns his vulnerability, dependency and weakness. When he attempts to leave Fada in the bar Fada begs him not to leave, "Boyle despised him at that moment, the weakness, the helplessness" (*TSOT* 168). Nonetheless Boyle remains his companion and is ultimately and irrevocably betrayed by Fada. The one witness to Boyle's crime "Fada has been singing his infested heart out to the newspapermen" (*TSOT* 241), a tale of debauched invention "too terrible to be disbelieved" (Meaney 129). Fada informs the newspapers that Boyle is a "terrorist sex fiend" responsible for a litany of crimes, including the "drug-crazed" murder of a young artist (*TSOT* 248). If Fada stood as an iconoclast to Northern Irish masculinity, any promise that he could signify an alternative modality of masculinity is abrogated.

On the run from the local police force, the Garda Síochána, Boyle turns to his other trusted friend in Dublin, Russian ex-soldier and neighbour Victor. Victor is described as the very physical personification of the hard man, "A big man" with his head "shaved tight to the skin, the eyes dark and unreflective of his mood" (*TSOT* 68). Furthermore, he is depicted as stoic, his inflection "toneless". Boyle perceives the two as sharing a masculine bond and camaraderie as both are ex-combatants. Neither man discusses his traumatic past, both instinctively having

“seemed to have agreed to leave these topics alone” which Boyle feels is liberating: “It was a relief not to have to explain yourself” (*TSOT* 68). Drinking alone together, a quintessential masculine bonding experience, Victor encourages Boyle to sing. Boyle, in a manner typically evocative of traumatic symptomology, is overcome by a sense of emptiness and feels himself “vanishing particle by particle” (*TSOT* 69). Victor doesn’t question or judge Boyle, but rather accepts him, perhaps even relates to him. Victor, knowing not to ask, instead “kept the silence” (*TSOT* 69).

The room in which Boyle has found refuge, however, also becomes a prison, even described in terms of a cell “Rectangle. Eight by four” (*TSOT* 239). Ensnared within for a number of weeks Boyle becomes increasingly suspicious of Victor and suspects duplicity. Although ambiguous, it is nonetheless heavily implied that Victor and the Russian Mafia are complicit in a variety of nefarious activities in the city, such as the murders of foreign nationals. One such is the death by drowning of a young woman, a murder for which Boyle, although innocent, is now suspected. Returning to the flat with bruises on his face Victor admits that he had been questioned by the police (as Boyle’s neighbour) as to Boyle’s whereabouts. He further admits to having “inadvertently” implicated Boyle in the crime. Boyle surmises (correctly as it is later implied) that the Russian mafia is seizing an opportunity to frame him. Once again Boyle has been betrayed by a man on whom he relied.

Escaping from Victor’s ‘safe’ house and desperate, Boyle contacts Snowy, his old OC from prison, the man who had helped him arrange his transfer to Maghaberry. Snowy’s earlier appearance in the novel just as Boyle has decided to leave Dublin and return to Derry is portentous. It is as if Boyle literally cannot leave his past behind him as Snowy “came right up behind him, right at his back” (*TSOT* 136). Nonetheless, as Snowy proceeds to remind him, it



was he who negotiated giving up Boyle's association with the IRA and subsequent transfer from the Maze to Maghaberry prison, "where there was no segregation of prisoners and he would be able to work and study" (*TSOT* 138). Snowy had encouraged him to continue his pursuit of academia. He offers Boyle his number "in case you need anything... Just in case" (*TSOT* 138). Believing he has no other recourse, Boyle calls the number given to him to arrange a meeting, hoping that Snowy's contacts in the IRA will be able to help him. Too late Boyle recognises the error of his ways: he has been betrayed again. He begs to leave, to which Snowy retorts, "Like you walked on Sock McKinney?" Snowy references Boyle's association with the Russians, which suggests their complicity in what is about to happen. A pistol is shoved into Boyle's mouth, and the last sound he hears is a "door slammed shut, no, worse than that, much worse" (*TSOT* 273). Boyle is betrayed by the fraternity he had trusted with his life, who in a new post-conflict society value image over ideology. His murder is blamed on "rogue elements" outside the IRA and is a result of Boyle's own "antisocial and criminal behaviour" (*TSOT* 296). Boyle is a victim of those who "wash the blood off their own hands by dipping them in his" (*TSOT* 296). In this post-conflict society, O'Reilly reveals that the Northern Irish conflict has not ended although perhaps the motivations behind it have changed.

Of all Boyle's friendships the most significant is his relationship with childhood friend Dainty. Dainty remained loyal to Boyle, faithfully visiting him in prison every month for eight years and treasures a photo of them taken together while Boyle was in prison, framed by Boyle's own handmade frame. The two share an intimate masculine bond, as Boyle looks back on their friendship as children growing up together. Whether "arguing over some girl in a campsite ... or whose turn it was at the wheel when Boyle's father was teaching them how to drive" they had "moments when their solidarity was almost visible to them and made them sweat" (*TSOT* 28).

Both Boyle and the ironically named Dainty had been aggressive in their youth. The two made what they term “warrior sticks”, that seem to symbolise the male friendship, “brush poles decorated with paints and wrapped in coloured tape for grip that they took everywhere with them” (*TSOT* 113). They used these as weapons if attacked, “Dainty with his stick was unbeatable, and fearless” (*TSOT* 162). However, their friendship is interrupted as Dainty and his family move to America when his brother, involved with the IRA, is shot dead by the British Army. Thus “Boyle was left without his best friend” (*TSOT* 113). This is significant as Dainty, unlike Boyle, is able to escape the violent, hypermasculine ethos of Northern Ireland. While Dainty is able to move on from and with his life, Boyle is stuck in the quagmire, easy prey to opportunist paramilitaries. While Dainty enjoys a normal existence and gets married “Boyle was attending meetings in houses where he learned how to put together a gun” (*TSOT* 114). While Dainty returns to Northern Ireland, the chasm of disconnect between the two is insurmountable. Dainty has no wish to become embroiled in the sectarian aspects of Northern Irish life and is disgusted by the choices Boyle has made. Dainty’s inadvertent betrayal is the most subtle yet poignant of all. Had it not been for his family’s intervention, Dainty could have followed the same path as both his brother and Boyle. Yet Dainty has been given an opportunity Boyle has not, a chance to be exposed to other societies, other countries and other masculinities, untinged by the trauma of the conflict. It is purely luck that stops him from following that same path, however harshly he resents and criticises Boyle for walking it.

Dainty understands Boyle to a degree that not even Boyle himself understands. The Boyle Dainty describes is far removed from the typically hyper-masculine depiction of paramilitaries that have come to prominence in Northern Irish media. Dainty highlights this disparity by ironically referring to him as, “Mad dog fucken Boyle” (*TSOT* 162). “Mad dog” is a

reference to Jonny Adair, a Loyalist paramilitary whose particularly gruesome and violent killings during the Troubles contradict Boyle's nature, actions and ideology. Dainty describes Boyle as a tragic character, well-intentioned but oblivious to potential danger and impressionable: "he thinks he's acting for the best, but he always manages to land himself in shit. All those years in prison because he couldn't say no to people" (*TSOT* 295). Fada too observes Boyle's vulnerability and susceptibility, noting that there was a "naivety, a fear of all before his eyes" (*TSOT* 77). It is only at the end of the novel that Boyle recognises that he has been aping masculine performances in an attempt to conform to rigid roles of masculinity prescribed by Northern Irish society. These are roles to which he cannot relate, and he acknowledges that he was "trying to pretend I was a big guerrilla warrior or a fucken philosopher" (*TSOT* 254).

However, it is too late for Boyle. As in classic trauma fiction, the past has indeed repeated itself. He returns to the origin of his problems – that false fraternity of the IRA. This is presaged as inevitable; however, part of the responsibility lies in the hands of society itself. Those men released as part of the Good Friday Agreement were expected to forget everything and immediately adjust to a post-conflict society. Like smithereens who "must forget there was ever a bomb" (*Love and Sleep* 82) Dainty too advises Boyle, "You fucken survived it so you did. Eight years. Now forget it" (*TSOT* 28). Northern Ireland had made few contingencies to accept the influx of traumatised men released into society. Marginalised and ignored, at best they were left to their own devices, at worst demeaned and ridiculed as "whiners and mopers and gripers and sniffers" (*TSOT* 298). These men are marginalised, a fact which O'Reilly reflects narratively; their traumatised lives are depicted on the periphery or are mentioned only anecdotally. For example, there is Boyle's cellmate Harry "who blew his hands off in a cave" (*TSOT* 39), Apple Hegarty, "another one who couldn't take it ... took him to hospital and he

jumped through a window” (*TSOT* 138). The prevailing ethos, perhaps born of the trauma of the conflict itself, is that one must remain stoic and make the best of one’s situation, no matter the difficulties. Dainty tries to reassure himself even after the trauma of his friend’s death that Northern Ireland isn’t that bad, “there are worse places, far worse, you never forget that” (*TSOT* 298). In the immediate aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Irish society believed in suppressing difficult or traumatic experiences, a reinforcement of typical masculinist discourse. One may perceive in O’Reilly’s depiction of society’s treatment of these individuals an inherent criticism of Northern Irish society.

Both Boyle and Niall are victims of trauma on several levels. There is the insidious trauma of being raised in a society dogged by conflict and the trauma inflicted by an aggressive, hegemonic masculinity in which violence is normalised and valorised. In a society that proscribes diversity and encouraged conformity to the patriarchal status quo, both are unable to find alternate expressions of their masculinity; suppressed and repressed they are victims of this masculinity. The hubristic and hedonistic Niall is furious and lashes out both literally and figuratively in his refusal to conform to the limitations and proscriptions of patriarchal masculinity. Whereas Niall lives on to fight and fornicate another day, Boyle is a much more tragic character, as much a victim of early post-conflict society as he is of masculinity. Treated as a sacrifice, a scapegoat, Boyle isn’t so much killed as he is *erased*. His own parents show no interest in the circumstances of their son’s death, and when Dainty offers to explain Boyle’s father refuses to listen: “I don’t want to hear another word about it. We’ll give him his funeral and that’s it finished. And we can all get on with our own lives” (*TSOT* 287). Boyle represents a past that the people of Northern Ireland do not wish to recognise, one that is violent and bloody and considered best buried and forgotten. This attitude may seem harsh, but it is yet again

indicative of communal trauma. Vickroy explains that “Societies, communities or families may want to preserve stability or be willing to sacrifice victims for other goals” (130). A traumatised community can be “a force that silences victims out of denial or guilt” (Vickroy 130). This idea of survivor guilt is echoed by Dainty in the novel, “The city ruined by an earthquake gets down on its knees for forgiveness... Shame of the victim, guilt of the survivor or something” (*TSOT* 294). In acknowledging these traumatic testimonies, the reader takes on the role of witness, transferring a sense of secondary trauma, as the reader/witness is compelled to vicariously experience the trauma of the protagonists. Dori Laub, in her discussion of survivor testimony acknowledges this transmissibility of trauma, what she terms the “hazards of listening.” Laub states that “as one comes to know the survivor, one really comes to know oneself; and that is not a simple task” (Felman and Laub 72). The existential crises faced by the survivor (in this case the protagonists) we in turn must face, “the listener can no longer ignore the question of facing death...of losing the ones that are close to us; the great question of our ultimate aloneness; our otherness from any other; our responsibility to and for our destiny” (Felman and Laub 72). This also raises the question of culpability, forcing the reader to question what role or responsibility did they or society play in events at that time? Perhaps that is why it has taken critics, especially those of us in Northern Ireland, so long to address the issues raised in Sean O’Reilly’s novels. We too needed a period of latency, of belatedness before we can address our own ‘unclaimed experiences’. Critics such as Maeve Davey and Malachi O’Doherty have criticised the “mindset of averting your eyes and refusing to admit the reality of your own involvement whether it is something you have chosen or not” (Davey 18). O’Reilly is forcing the reader to look at and accept difficult and painful issues, no easy task, but perhaps a necessary one. As Davey writes, “how is this long and bloody conflict meant to be finally and lastingly resolved if everyone, from

the public to politicians, journalists, playwrights and novelists, is too busy looking the other way to address the disturbing legacy it has left behind?" (18).

This in turn may have ramifications for understanding the reception of O'Reilly's novels. O'Reilly's work is often perceived as not receiving the recognition it deserves, as Shane Barry notes in his online interview with O'Reilly, "Showing the Bones." In the same interview it is mentioned that common criticisms of O'Reilly's work deem it as simply "too dark." Indeed, Fiona McCann notes that his two male protagonists are "extremely objectionable characters who struggle to contain their violent outbursts" (115). However, one could argue that in depicting these violent, angry men, O'Reilly has created for himself two proxies. Both are justifiably angry at their treatment by a society in which we are all complicit. This forces the reader to address a previously suppressed traumatic past. As O'Reilly states himself in interview, "It is important to remember that the artist may be an outsider, an angry voice, a twisted voice, a moral outlaw, jailed and loathed, or a voice that doesn't give a damn" (Barry). In creating these characters O'Reilly gives voice to a multivalent yet hitherto silenced and disenfranchised masculinity that has been too long suppressed. In this context O'Reilly quotes Georges Bataille, who says that the eye "is the sewer of the soul, the eye pours out. Inside is outside" (Barry). We may be repelled by his characters, but we can no longer ignore them. In these two novels O'Reilly depicts adroitly the fundamental crisis in masculinity experienced by the characters, a crisis that is inextricably Northern Irish, and intrinsically linked to the socio-historical setting of early post-conflict society.

## Chapter Two: Queering Masculinities: Locating and Locuting the Other in the Northern Irish Post-Conflict *Bildungsroman*

“Nothing in man -not even his body- is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-  
recognition or for understanding other men”

Foucault “Two Lectures”

An examination of the depiction of queer masculinities in the Northern Irish novel is fundamental to establishing the existence of counter-hegemonic constructions of multivalent masculinity. Currently this chapter is the only such study of queer masculinities in these contemporary novels, and it is essential to establish and draw attention to the minority voice too often drowned out by more heteronormative depictions of masculinity in the Northern Irish post-conflict novel.

Foucault is widely attributed as being among the first cultural theorists to posit identity and sexuality as socially constructed. His oeuvre was instrumental to later theorists Judith Butler and Adrienne Rich as the foundation for their analytical work on gender and sexuality, often now referred to under the umbrella term of queer theory. Queer as a term is inherently problematic. Re-appropriated from its pejorative origins, most notably by gay activists and academics, its theoretical application by necessity defies a finite explication. As theorist Annamarie Jagose remarks, “its very definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics” (1). Without wishing to oversimplify the term, if one assumes hetero and gender normativity as the dominant cultural ideology or discourse, queer theory is, then, a diacritical term analysing “a wide range of impulses and cultural expressions including space for describing and expressing bisexual, transsexual and straight queerness” (Doty 472). Thus, queer theory provides an essential hermeneutic for analysing the depiction of sexuality and gender in fiction. As Riki Wilchins affirms, “gayness and gender will always be inextricably intertwined”

(15). This interconnection between gender and sexuality has profound ontological implications for the construction and depiction of masculinity in Northern Irish fiction. Sociologist John Nagle observes that in areas of violent conflict, divided societies construct a particularly virulent “form of hegemonic masculinity; a culturally idealised form of masculinity that stabilises a structure of dominance and oppression in the gender order” (4). Dominant, hegemonic masculinity predicates subordinate masculine modalities and as Cronin asserts, for “the twentieth century homosexual and gay masculinity chiefly served this structural function” (“Clubs, Closets and Catwalks: GAA Stars and the Politics of Contemporary Irish Masculinity” 16). A full examination of representations of multivalent masculinities in post-conflict fiction necessarily entails analysis of the marginal masculinities depicted as ‘other’.

This in itself could be a problematic endeavour. There are some references to homosexuality in the work of Forrest Reid and Brian Moore, as well as Maurice Leitch’s protagonist in his 1965 novel *Liberty Lad*. Subsequently the only other references may be found in Patrick McCabe’s 1998 novel *Breakfast on Pluto* and Patterson’s *The International* of 1999, published almost congruently with the 1998 Agreement. One might logically assume that, post the 1998 Agreement and the establishment of the Equality Commission and similar legislative campaigns for a more inclusive society, there would be more frequent and diverse representations of gay and queer characters and experience in Northern Irish fiction. However Caroline Magennis in her monograph *Sons of Ulster*, asserts that despite there being encouraging progress in this regard in 1999 there was only a “barely audible queer Ulster voice” (119). The peace process itself may have been to blame. John Nagle suggests that although “the peace process theoretically provides fresh opportunities for LGBT activists” the reverse may actually



be true. In fact, violent masculinities and ethnomasculinist ideals only become further entrenched by the process (5).

However, there in fact has been an emergence of queer fiction since the turn of the millennium. In 2001, openly gay author Jarlath Gregory published *Snapshots: A Novel*, a coming of age novel depicting a young man's experience of life and sexuality against the backdrop of the Troubles in late nineties Crossmaglen. Set in 1960's rural Northern Ireland, Damian McNicholl's debut novel, *A Son Called Gabriel*, published in 2004, similarly charts the experiences of young Gabriel and his attempt to come to terms with his increasing awareness of his homosexuality. Also, in 2004 Brian Kennedy's first novel, *The Arrival of Fergal Flynn*, and the sequel *Roman Song*, published in 2006, depict an arguably semi-autobiographical account of gay protagonist Fergal Flynn and his coming of age in a turbulent 1980's Belfast. Most recently, Paul McVeigh's critically acclaimed novel *The Good Son* in 2015, with its depiction of the young, naïve Mickey Donnelly, won the Polari award for a first book that effectively depicts the LGBT experience.

There are particularly striking parallels between these authors and their texts. Firstly, it is notable that each author and his protagonist has a Catholic background and places his protagonist in a staunch Catholic and Nationalist, working-class community. Furthermore, each novelist has utilised the narrative form of the *bildungsroman*. That the Catholic, Nationalist background is so exclusively represented is perhaps not as surprising as it first appears. A 2015 survey by Hayes and Nagle regarding the validity of gay marriage in Northern Ireland had interesting and pertinent results. Of those questioned 61% of those identifying as British and Unionist rejected same-sex marriage, as opposed to only 30% of those identifying as Irish Nationalist. Nagle suggests that this wide ethnonationalist differential could be a product of the recent Nationalist political agenda conflating personal and political equality with LGBT rights (16). This marriage

of marginalities and the potential implications associated with it will be examined later in this chapter. Similarly, there may also be links between using the narrative form of the *bildungsroman* and Nationalist literary tradition. Michael Cronin has charted the cultural significance of the Irish Catholic *bildungsroman* in his recent text, *Impure Thoughts: Sexuality, Catholicism and Literature in Twentieth-Century Ireland*. Cronin posits that the “extraordinary centrality and durability” of the *bildung* narrative in Irish canonical writing is due to the genre’s unique capacity “to negotiate both individual and cultural crises of sexual formation” (*Impure Thoughts* 5). He asserts that thematically “the *bildungsroman* has been to the fore in the exploration of sexuality by Irish writers” (*Impure Thoughts* 2). Indeed, when one thinks of the Irish *bildungsroman* it is impossible not to recall Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*. It is hardly coincidence that authors from this background in Northern Ireland are utilising this genre to reflect more modern sexual concerns and cultural crises. This is not a phenomenon indigenous to Northern Ireland, but in fact reflects a more global trend. Cheryl Stobie notes the “most frequent sub-category in the upwards of thirty post-2000 South African texts which ... deal with queer/alternative sexualities is the male *bildungsroman*/coming-out story” (326). Having located and established the existence of a queer male voice, particularly vocal since the new millennium, one is obliged to examine the manner in which that voice is being located, in this case the relationship between the utilisation of the structure of the *bildungsroman*/coming-out novel to position and articulate the queer male voice.

This chapter analyses the debut novels of each of these authors, however particular focus will be placed on Gregory’s *Snapshots*, McNicholl’s *A Son Called Gabriel* and McVeigh’s *The Good Son*. Analyses are formed within the literary framework of the *bildungsroman* and its power to negotiate and subvert gender and heteronormative discourse. By employing the

heuristic of queer theory this chapter locates and locutes the plurality of marginal masculinities and male experience within depictions of multivalent masculinities in the Northern Irish post-conflict *bildungsroman*.

### 1. Queering the *Bildungsroman* and the Coming-Out Novel

From its emergence in the eighteenth century, with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795) often credited as the genre's prototypical debut, the *bildung* narrative has continued to flourish and evolve through several iterations. Etymologically located in German, with '*bild*' and '*bildung*' often translated as 'form' or 'formation,' the *bildungsroman* is a narrative of formation, specifically self-formation. As Mikhail Bakhtin states, the genre is concerned with the portrayal of "the image of man in the process of becoming" (21). He charts the protagonists' progress, often from childhood or adolescence, to maturity, and ideally, self-determination and realisation (21). However, beyond this central ideological concept, definition of the genre is somewhat nebulous, proving elusive and controversial. Mark Redfield asserts that the *bildungsroman* is a "phantom formation," an ideological aesthetic in which content and form are inextricably linked "precisely because the content is the forming-of-content" (42). Thematically, Buckley insists that the *bildungsroman* includes the majority of the following features: "childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy" (18). Michael Cronin asserts that the teleology of the individual is by necessity chronotopically located as, "the narrative of self-development proceeds in conjunction with the narrative of historical development" (*Impure Thoughts* 15). Ideologically the *bildungsroman* inhabits the intersection between individualism and socialisation as both the narrative and the protagonist are impelled "to find some sort of resolution to the relationship between the individual and modern society"

(17). Thus, one could argue, as does Cronin, that due to “its capacity to forge a dynamic relationship between the narration of epochal historical transformations and the narration of self-formation” (15), the *bildung* narrative uniquely negotiates both the individual and socio-cultural concerns of its time. From the traditional, realist *bildungsroman*, which both in form and theme reflected the issues and concerns of the enlightenment, through to the progress of modernism, the narrative form has been adopted and adapted to reflect the socio-historical and cultural concerns of the age. Whereas previously the classical *bildungsroman* was criticised for privileging and positioning the universality of a white, male, heteronormative experience, the modern *bildung* narrative enunciates the experience of the minority voice, giving way to contemporary female, colonial and queer *bildungsromane*. This marks a narrative transition “from traditional metropolitan novels of formation and social affirmation to increasingly global and fragmentary narratives of transformation and rebellion” (Boes 241). This demonstrates the flexibility of the genre which “mutates as writers experiment from one generation to the next with different solutions to problems of national development or stasis and to problems of individual sexual formation or deformation” (*Impure Thoughts* 20). The *bildungsroman*’s particular capacity to provide as Cronin asserts, “a narrative form with which to grapple with symbolically entwined problems of sexuality, subjectivity and post-colonial development” could explain its popularity amongst gay Northern Irish authors (“Troubled Formations” 29).

Cronin locates within the ‘queer *bildungsromane*’ of Kate O’Brien and Brendan Behan “the literary precursors of the lesbian and gay ‘coming-out novel’ of recent times” (*Impure Thoughts* 2). Cronin and other critics credit Edmund White’s *A Boy’s Own Story* (1982), as the first example of the coming-out novel (‘He’s My Country’ 255, Xhonneux 95). Given the structural, ideological and thematic confluences between the *bildungsroman* and the coming-out

novel, it is possible to see why the two terms are becoming ubiquitously synonymous. Though the *bildungsroman* is too complex and nuanced for an exact definition, it may be summarised, as does Okuyade, as the difficult transition from ignorance to cognition. As Ogaga Okuyade posits, “a novel of ‘formation’ or ‘education’ charts and traces the development of the passage from childhood through various experiences, usually involving a spiritual crisis, into maturity and the recognition of the character and her role in the world” (146). By substituting spiritual for sexual, one may discern distinct parallels in the coming-out novel as, according to Saxey, the “protagonist is most likely to be a troubled teenager whose insistent desires drag him or her through a minefield of social and sexual dramas” (1). The narrative thus (arguably idealistically) delineates an individual overcoming a troubled path towards accepting, if not embracing, a non-heteronormative sexual identity. Michael Cronin summarises the structural and thematic development of the coming-out novel as moving “from oppression and repression to liberation, with the protagonist finding affirmation, solidarity, and the potential for sexual and emotional fulfilment within a metropolitan queer subculture” (‘He’s My Country’ 255). This particular convention of the coming-out novel is the cause of much controversy in queer studies. Mirroring the conventional *bildungsroman* by portraying the integration of the self into society as the inevitable and successful conclusion is, as Okuyade criticises, a means of “subtly endorsing and validating the established order of that society” (51). Cronin equally claims that the coming-out narrative divests the discourse of “any radical political implications” (‘He’s My Country’ 267). Similarly, Judith Roof argues that the perceived victorious culmination of the novel in “coming-out” is rather the forced visibility of the protagonist as ‘other’, as binary opposite to heterosexuality with all the attendant hierarchical implications therein (148). Furthermore, she argues that visibility politics “tries to strong-arm opinion by changing the image of an identity

within the same logic that produced that identity, instead of trying to identify and alter the process by which identities are produced and situated and by which visibility/invisibility itself becomes the problem” (146). In this way, queer theorist Judith Roof asserts that the traditional coming-out narrative serves to reinforce the “heteronarrative” as opposed to subverting it (76).

These notions would only have merit if the narrative conventions of the coming-out novel were to remain static. However, as with the *bildungsroman*, one may argue that the coming-out novel is also a chronotopic narrative, equally dynamic and capable of mutation and application across generations. Just as the narrative structure of the *bildungsroman* was “adapted and adjusted to meet the changed historical conditions” of modernism, so too may the narrative form of the coming-out novel structurally evolve to better meet the demands of a post-modern discourse. In addition, it is also entirely possible to interpret the utilisation of these narrative structures conversely, as does Anne Goudsmit in her thesis “The Counter-*Bildungsroman* in Northern Irish Fiction 1965-1996.” She argues that it is possible to examine the formal choices made by these authors and regard them as “novels that utilise, adapt but dialectically transform the original form” of these works into their very antitheses. In doing so the author may be critiquing society within the novel (15). Boes posits that many recent examples of the *bildungsroman* exemplify these mutations, as “novels such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* demonstrate that the form can be adapted to suit modernist and post-modernist literary techniques” (239).

A further thematic parallel between the two genres is the proclivity towards including autobiographical or semi-autobiographical elements. Okuyade observes of the *bildungsroman* that “besides the novels being narratives of growth, they exhibit an autobiographical propensity” (142). Stobie, in analysing the recent upsurge of *bildungsromane*/coming-out novels of South

Africa, also notes the “hallmarks of authorial investment” (326). In her article “The Classic Coming-out Novel: Unacknowledged Challenges to the Heterosexual Mainstream,” Xhonneux argues that the reason for this is to invest the characterisation with “truth value,” especially requisite in the coming-out novel. Both narrative structures demand empathy to some extent from the reader and this is especially true of the coming-out genre as “coming-out stories are presented as a truthful picture of a gay hero or heroine’s life, which is why they are often presented as autobiographies” (Xhonneux 95). The term Xhonneux utilises is “biomythology,” an amalgamation of elements of the autobiographical or biographical with the fictional or mythological. This propensity towards including autobiographical elements is also exemplary of an author’s first novel, as Okuyade posits that as “debutants, one way to begin writing is to write and repackage the self” (142). This is a pertinent observation given that the primary novels examined here are all authorial debuts.

Thus, it seems the genres of the *bildungsroman* and the coming-out novel are, narratively, inextricably linked. However, to borrow an axiom, though all coming-out novels are *bildungsromane*, the reverse is not reciprocally true, not all *bildungsromane* are coming-out novels. Therefore, one might posit the positionality of the coming-out novel as contingent upon and thus a sub-genre of the *bildungsroman*.

With their employment of first-person narrative and a mostly linear, chronotopic plot development, each of the debut novels discussed in this chapter ostensibly conform to the narrative expectations of the *bildungsroman* and perhaps equally to that of the coming-out novel. However, examination of the formal techniques employed by these authors shows that all have adopted and adapted the structure uniquely, and whether conforming to or subverting the

narrative, each has a profound effect in locating and locating the voice of queer masculinity in Northern Ireland.

Set in rural Crossmaglen in the late nineties (post-Agreement but not necessarily post-conflict) Gregory's coming of age novel *Snapshots* reflects Bakhtin's contention that the *bildungsroman* primarily depicts the process of becoming. As Cronin asserts in his review, it is "as much a novel about becoming a man as becoming a gay man" (*The Stinging Fly* 1). It further reflects the *bildungsroman*'s concern with truthfulness and realism as it is not "the stuff of fantasy: it's far too squalid and wholly unerotic" yet by depicting the squalor and bleak, unerotic sex the novel more faithfully represents "those truly awful teenage years spent in a dreary small town" (1). Though chiefly structured in the chononormative fashion that typifies the *bildungsroman*, *Snapshots* features two protagonists, Oisín and Jude, thus forming what Goodman refers to as a "double *bildungsroman*" (141). In personality Oisín and Jude are polar opposites; Oisín, unlike Jude, is flamboyant, artistic and secure in his sexual identity, asserting, "Queer is cool" (*Snapshots* 27). Conversely Jude, whom Oisín terms a "very normal non-individual" (*Snapshots* 11), finds solace in science and prefers to blend in and go unnoticed, "I keep my head down and that's fine and hardly anyone bothers me. Or Notices" (*Snapshots* 84). Both are sensitive, thoughtful individuals, Oisín in his artistic temperament and Jude in caring for his grandmother and his love of animals, and both feel restricted in expressing their sexuality in parochial Crossmaglen. Thus, both protagonists conform to Buckley's expectation of the *bildungsroman* to depict what Goodman describes as "a sensitive male child who grows up in a provincial environment where constraints are placed upon his imaginative life" (28). Goodman summarises Buckley's further expectations of the formation novel as the "young man's progressive alienation from his schooling; his departure from home; his sexual initiation; and his



ultimate assessment of life's possibilities" (18). Note both protagonists feel stifled by their family's heteronormative expectations and undergo their own sexual initiations within the novel. Furthermore, with Oisín's increasing disillusionment with education's inability to provide answers, his subsequent withdrawal from university and violent flight from his parental home, all of Buckley's narrative requisites for the novel of formation are met. With each protagonist experiencing his own *bildung* experience, each narrative both parallels and juxtaposes the other, providing counterpoint to, yet mutually reinforcing, the overarching narrative. Ericka Hoagland, in her discussion of the First Nations *bildungsroman*, argues that including twin protagonists serves to subvert normative ideals of the *bildung* narrative. This "manoeuvre not only subverts the traditional conception of the *bildungsroman* charting individual process and growth, but acknowledges the importance of collective growth and struggle" (Hoagland 102).

The novel opens in Crossmaglen as Oisín attempts to convince Peter, his best friend, to go on a night out together. While Oisín's narration is garrulous and fast paced, with a flamboyant, colloquial brogue, his observations are depicted as shallow, callous and occasionally naive. His friendship with Peter, who is also presented as non-heterosexual, provides a framework to position Oisín's thoughts about sexuality at this juncture. Both articulate their resistance to being categorised under binary terms as gay, "It's feels right saying you're gay, and it's a relief, but it also ties you down" says Oisín, who equally asserts his rights to "keep his options open" (*Snapshots* 6). To this end Oisín is pursuing Shena, a young woman with whom he has an "on again off again" relationship for approximately half the novel. However, as the novel develops Oisín matures and increasingly asserts his sexuality by coming out to his friends as gay. This and his sexual initiation with supposedly straight Neil contribute to Oisín's dispensing with this pseudo relationship, laying the groundwork for his later relationship with his long-time crush

Jude. Oisín matures physically, sexually and intellectually, as is reflected in the narrative. His narration loses its previous affectations as his thoughts become increasingly philosophical and existential as he ruminates on consumerism and the human condition, axiomatically coining the term “paraphernaliaenation” to describe the increasing materialism he observes within society (*Snapshots* 116). Previously considering himself (and Jude) to operate “between the cracks of society” (*Snapshots* 22), Oisín does, albeit reluctantly, become assimilated and accepted into society. The majority of the reactions to his coming out are positive and supportive, met by mild concern, curiosity and the occasional proposition. That Oisín becomes assimilated into society speaks more of Northern Irish society’s adaptation rather than his own. Oisín remains consistent and confident in his gay identity throughout the novel; it is society that has to some extent matured, rather than him. This meets another narrative concern of the *bildungsroman*. As Mark Stein notes in *Black British Literature: The Novels of Transformation*, the narrative “has a dual function: it is about the formation of its protagonist as well as the transformation of British society and cultural institutions” (22). This transformation and acceptance of sexuality, however, does not extend to Oisín’s parents. Toward the end of the novel, Oisín and Jude’s relationship culminates in their sexual consummation at Oisín’s family home. This is perhaps a subconsciously deliberate move on Oisín’s part – forcing his parents to address the issue of his sexuality. This incites a violent altercation, his mother asserting “You’re disgusting!” and “You make me ill” (*Snapshots* 192) which provokes Oisín to strike his mother and leave his family home, swearing never to return. By contrast, Jude’s *bildung* narrative is more conservative. Concerned with his evolving issues with sexuality and masculinity, his narrative serves as a subplot to Oisín’s primary one. At time it neatly mirrors Oisín’s as he too discusses sexuality with a gay best friend, has a sexual initiation with an ostensibly straight male and experiences a

confrontation with his mother about sexuality. This confrontation, overtly presaged in the novel, is perhaps subconsciously motivated on his part, to provoke a discussion of sexuality. There is his ordering of gay magazines, for example, to his familial address, which are intercepted by his mother who instead places *The Sacred Heart* magazine under his pillow. The pacing of the narrative seems to reach a point of climax wherein one might expect Jude to openly assert his sexuality, however this moment becomes peripatetic as instead of outing himself, he vicariously outs his best friend Ciaran, frustrating a moment of would-be self-actualisation. Jude's self-narrated vignettes in the novel end with a poignant image of Jude discussing the conversation with Ciaran in which he lies and denies telling his mother that Ciaran is gay. During the conversation Jude becomes increasingly fascinated with the telephone, twisting the cord and envisioning the phone as a laughing skull. As Ciaran hangs up Jude is left "in the dust ... with phone wrapped around my face" (*Snapshots* 163). This image is a clear metaphor for Jude's failure to come out, to communicate and confront his sexual identity. Instead, he outs Ciaran.

*Snapshots* clearly has profound thematic resonance with the *bildungsroman*. However, although broadly meeting the taxonomic criterion of the conventions of the *bildungsroman*, of the novels under consideration *Snapshots* is the most thematically dense and narratively complex. Though the weight of the narrative is carried by Oisín and Jude as both intradiegetic and homodiegetic narrators, the narrative is interspersed with extradiegetic vignettes, the titular *Snapshots*. For the most part these *Snapshots* feature a third person, omniscient narrator describing key scenes that serve as a bridge to connect the two narratives of Oisín and Jude, therefore providing objective distance and reinforcing the narrative. However, the overall narrative is simultaneously disrupted and subverted by a third dimension to the novel, a parallel narrative of trauma.

These narratives of trauma and of identity formation have distinct thematic and narratological parallels. Critics have noted that the *bildungsroman* narrative is often precipitated by a traumatic event. As A. Gala remarks, “In most cases, a loss of parents or another traumatic event pushes the young man away from home, forcing him to find his way in an unforgiving society” (279). In Oisín’s case this traumatic event is the death of his older brother Sean. Early in the novel Oisín only alludes to his brother’s absence, conferring upon it a sense of agency as he remarks of his parents, “they’ve been worse since Sean left us” and “when he went away” (*Snapshots* 4, 41). However, as the novel progresses the reality of Sean’s death is revealed piecemeal, as is typical of trauma fiction. Sean was involved with the IRA and died in suspicious circumstances, being in charge of a car full of semtex which exploded, ostensibly, prematurely. As with the *bildungsroman*, which at its heart charts the “progressive metamorphosis of the characters from ignorance to cognition” (Okuyade 146), the protagonist of trauma fiction similarly moves from a type of ignorance, by repressing the traumatic event, to cognition, by confronting and accepting traumatic memories (Garratt 5). Thus, in a manner similar to the *bildung* narrative, trauma fiction is a “work that balances narration and narrative” in which “both subject and method become central” (Garratt 5). Gregory depicts the traumatic narrative of Sean’s death by utilising two of the snapshot vignettes extradiegetically and by interjecting a single narrative vignette narrated by Sean himself. These sections concern events happening outside of the chronolinear narrative and explicate a traumatic metanarrative. The first snapshot depicts a British soldier, who is suddenly killed literally by a ‘snap shot’. This is extrapolated upon later in the narrative by a similar interpolation of a vignette revealing Neil as the IRA sniper responsible. Sean’s intradiegetic narrative crucially contextualises the events surrounding his death, insinuating that Neil is to some extent responsible for Sean’s murder. This trauma

narrative is essential in comprehending Oisín's teleology, his unconscious conflation of sexuality and violence and his inability to open up to Jude to form an intimate relationship. As he remarks "I couldn't even try to get close to Jude because of Sean" (*Snapshots* 41). Impelled by a need to avenge Sean, it is implied that Oisín forces Neil into a car crash, mirroring the death of his brother. This dreamlike sequence amalgamates the death of Neil with the death of his brother, allowing him to reclaim his traumatic experience. At the close of the novel Oisín takes Jude to his brother's grave. Having assimilated his traumatic experience, he is now capable of intimacy.

Gregory's *Snapshots* is a novel about young gay men coming of age. It is a novel about an insular, broken society slow to adapt and change. It is about the trauma of grief, and it is a love story between two young men. As such *Snapshots* has the potential to occupy a liminal, intra-genre positionality; however, it may best be read as exemplary of the *bildungsroman* in which for Oisín, as for many people living in Northern Ireland at that time, trauma is necessarily and inextricably linked to every aspect of daily life. That Gregory's *bildungsroman* is complex and non-linear does not disqualify it from the genre. As J.M. McGee comments, "the *bildungsroman* is especially well suited to capture the fragmentation and disillusionment" of the modern age (5). Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is likewise (albeit more narratively complex), an example of the non-linear *bildungsroman*. Indeed, the question is not whether one can present a *bildung* narrative that is complicated by trauma, but rather, if one is to accurately portray coming of age in Northern Irish society of that era, how can one not? Ultimately Gregory's *bildungsroman* reflects most adroitly Judith Butler's contention that when trauma is depicted within narrative, the "narrative falters, as it must" (*Precarious Life* 23).

If *Snapshots* represents the most narratively complex of the novels, then Brian Kennedy's *The Arrival of Fergal Flynn* is the most conventional. As the title intimates, the novel depicts the

coming of age of the eponymous Fergal, set against the violent backdrop of 1980's Belfast. With its depiction of a young, asthmatic singer coming to terms with his sexuality one may infer semi-autobiographical overtones with the singer and author himself. The novel portrays Fergal's struggle to both literally and metaphorically find his voice, charting his progression from bullied, abused and introverted schoolboy, beset by feelings of guilt and confusion over his sexuality, to his emergence as a sexually experienced, talented young vocalist. He is aided in this transformation by the intervention of a young, handsome parish priest, Father Mac, who not only discovers and nurtures Fergal's natural vocal aptitude, but physically extricates him from his dangerous and abusive family home. The romance between Father Mac and Fergal is potentially subversive, given that it explicitly depicts the consensual, sexual relationship between a twenty-seven-year-old priest and a seventeen-year-old schoolboy. However, Kennedy detracts from this potentially subversive act by his idealised, romanticised portrayal of Father Mac, whose heroic characterisation may stretch the limits of willing suspension of disbelief. It is interesting to note that Kennedy ages Fergal from sixteen to seventeen before their sexual relationship begins (concurrently the 2004 legal age of both homo- and heterosexual consent in Northern Ireland), the very night of Fergal's seventeenth birthday. Although in the 1980's in which the novel is set, the age of consent for homosexual intercourse would have been higher, one can't help but infer that by waiting for Fergal's birthday and reflecting the implied age of consent that Kennedy is attempting to normalise the relationship to make it more palatable for readers, thus limiting the narrative's radical political potential. Given the themes of romance and redemption within the novel, played out in Fergal's rise from sexually repressed boy, bullied and abused for his perceived sexuality and effeminate voice, to celebrated vocalist about to embark upon an operatic career in Italy, this narrative is paradigmatic of the typical coming-out novel. As Cronin

observes, narratively the coming-out novel structures itself around the protagonists' movement from "repression and oppression to liberation" ('He's My Country' 257), as exemplified by Fergal. There is even the promise of acceptance in the more cosmopolitan city of Rome. *The Arrival of Fergal Flynn* may not utilise the coming-out narrative to be deliberately subversive or politically potent or radical, however this potentiality nonetheless remains in the narrative. Fergal voices an alternative expression to the largely heteronormative and masculinist discourse of Northern Irish Troubles fiction. Indeed, the very existence of a positive depiction of homosexuality in the form of coming-out novel is subversive in itself, as Foucault acknowledges, "the mere fact that one is speaking about [homosexuality] has the appearance of deliberate transgression" (*History of Sexuality* 6).

Damien McNicholl's *A Son Called Gabriel*, also published in 2004, is set in the rural hills of Northern Ireland during the 1960's and 1970's. Charting the development of the eponymous Gabriel from the ages of six to sixteen, it depicts Gabriel's struggles with his sexual and masculine identity, complicated by sexual abuse he suffers in school, and his coming out to his family. Moving from ignorance to cognition Gabriel uncovers a family secret, that in fact he is adopted. His 'uncle' Brendan, a priest involved in missionary work in Africa, is actually his father and Gabriel is the result of a scandalous affair between the priest and a young unmarried woman. The overarching narrative certainly conforms to that of the *bildung*, however embedded within this one may discern that the central trope of the coming-out novel is employed inversely to devastating effect upon the protagonist's life. Michael Cronin states that the central premise of the coming-out novel is that it "structures itself around the movement of the individual from being silenced, closeted and inauthentic – either dissembling to keep the truth about himself from others, or not yet having access to that truth himself – to a position of psychic health that appears

to emerge from authenticity and truth telling” (‘He’s My Country’ 256). At the outset of the novel Gabriel begins the novel unaware of the implications of his same sex attraction, however as the novel progresses, through his repeated unsuccessful attempts to force romantic and intimate sexual relationships with women, he becomes increasingly cognisant of his non-heterosexuality. Rather than this having a psychologically positive, empowering effect as Gabriel discovers his ‘authentic’ self, the revelation catalyses the reverse. Gabriel describes “overwhelming panic that I was indeed becoming a homosexual”, plunging him further into mental anguish as he begins to physically abuse himself: “I pulled at my hair and pinched my arms” (*ASCG* 329, 330). Finally overwhelmed by the stress of repressing these emotions Gabriel desperately comes out to his mother: “I’m homosexual. I’m trying to pass these exams and might get an A and I might be homosexual. It’s driving me mad. I don’t want to be homosexual” (*ASCG* 330). Unlike in the previous novels, Gabriel’s family tries to support him, his adopted brother and sister particularly. As his sister Caroline proclaims, “I want you to know you’re my brother and I love you, no matter what the future might bring” (*ASCG* 339). Similarly, his brother James affirms “I’ll always be friends with you too” (*ASCG* 339). However, this support is predicated on the fact that Gabriel is merely going through a phase. To this end Gabriel’s mother brings him to discuss his “little problem” with the local priest (*ASCG* 334). Though Father McAtamney confirms his mother’s suspicions that his homosexual attraction is indeed a phase, he interestingly and ambiguously advises that should Gabriel have a monogamous relationship with a man, that though the Catholic Church will not condone the relationship “it will not condemn it either” (*ASCG* 335). This incenses Gabriel’s mother who only becomes more convinced that Gabriel is not gay, given that he does not display the ostentatiousness she believes is associated with homosexuality. She asserts “No, son. No, you’re definitely not that sort”



(*ASCG* 337). Ironically, Gabriel's adopted father, with whom he has a fractured and difficult relationship, also attempts to mend the bridge between them and comfort his son. He apologises for his lack of demonstrative affection but asserts that he does indeed love Gabriel as much as his other biological children, "And don't think I'm disappointed in you because of this homosexual business either" (*ASCG* 360). This climactic point would be the apex of the traditional coming-out narrative, with Gabriel becoming accepted by his family for his 'authentic' self. Indeed at this confirmation Gabriel's "heart leaped". However, it instead serves as a moment of peripatetic reversal, as his father continues, "Your mother tells me some boys go through that, so that's all there is to it, as far as I'm concerned" (*ASCG* 360). McNicholl employs the traditional narrative structure of the coming-out novel to subversive effect, as Gabriel's increasing acknowledgement of his burgeoning homosexuality plunges him to the depths of mental illness as opposed to psychic health. His coming out to his family is met with love and support, however this form of love and support is misplaced, ironically forcing Gabriel to become more 'inauthentic' and repressed than liberated. His family doctor prescribes a course of Valium to ameliorate the distressing symptoms of Gabriel's 'phase' and accompanies it with the advice, "Don't think about doing these things with men and it'll be gone before you know it" (*ASCG* 338). Whereas the traditional coming-out novel would culminate in "the protagonist's celebratory assumption of a visible gay or lesbian identity after a painful period of hiding in the closet" (Xhonneux 96), Gabriel finds himself in the antithetical position. Gabriel asserts, "As I'd feared, the poisonous lusts returned with a vengeance soon after the effects of the medication ended" (*ASCG* 362). However, when his mother asks if he has transitioned out of his 'phase' Gabriel lies, "I told her it had gone away, that I was cured" (*ASCG* 364). McNicholl may subvert one of the two fundamental characteristics of the coming out novel, namely that the protagonist achieves "true

self-expression” (Saxey 89), however in doing so he reinforces the “first concept that is important for the characterisation of the coming out narrative, that of the story’s truth value” (Xhonneux 96). By subverting the traditional coming-out narrative McNicholl articulates the experience of many queer individuals, that coming out is not the triumphant, self-affirming conclusion is it often depicted to be in contemporary queer fiction. The truth for many is that the progress to self-awareness of one’s sexual identity can be traumatic and harrowing, and it does not culminate in acceptance and integration into one’s society. In this lies McNicholl’s implicit critique of the heteronormative masculinist discourse of 1970’s Northern Ireland, and a stark warning to society not to make the mistakes of the past.

In many ways Paul McVeigh’s *The Good Son* typifies the *bildung* narrative. Written in one single, linear, continuous narrative with protagonist Mickey Donnelly as intradiegetic and homodiegetic narrator, it is exemplary of the classical *bildungsroman*. However, as Pulitzer Prize winning Robert Olen Butler notes, this does not detract from the complexity of the novel. Rather, as Butler puts it, Paul McVeigh “turns a coming of age novel into high art, with complex yearnings” (*TGS* cover). He comments that “young Mickey Donnelly navigates the Troubles like Huck Finn navigates the Mississippi river, prematurely becoming a fully-flighted adult and thereby letting us see the human condition through penetratingly fresh eyes” (*TGS* 1). Given the asserted teleology of the protagonist, it is all the more impressive that McVeigh manages to encapsulate this transition over a period of only several months, depicting 10-year-old Mickey Donnelly’s summer vacation between leaving primary school and starting secondary school. This is a brief but profound period in any youngster’s life, colloquially referred to as going to the ‘big’ school, the implications being that one is leaving childhood behind and moving into adolescence. This is further compounded in Northern Ireland, as for many, the last two years of primary

school revolve around preparation for the 11 plus, an important exam that determines whether a pupil will attend the academically proficient grammar school, or the less academically impressive secondary school. The poignancy of this is not lost on Mickey, for whom having passed the 11 plus means that he can finally attend the prestigious St Malachy's Grammar School, a place, he asserts "where you're actually allowed to learn things" (*TGS* 7). Seen as a safe haven by Mickey, his attendance is also an intrinsic part of his life plan to "Get away from this school. Get smart. Get to America" (*TGS* 9). Mickey's plans are problematised in the first chapter, however, as due to his alcoholic father's constant drinking and prolific spending, his family do not have the money to send him to grammar school and thus Mickey will have to attend the rough secondary school his masculinist, antagonistic brother attends, St Gabriel's. From the initial five chapters the narrative is delineated chapter by chapter as a weekly countdown to Mickey's attending St Gabriel's.

As a 10-year-old boy Mickey, unlike the other protagonists, is not going to transform into a mature, sexually experienced and cognisant adult. However, forged in the crucible of the Troubles in 1980's Belfast, Mickey moves from innocent and naïve 'good son' to the worldlier, pubescent protagonist depicted at the close of the novel. This transition is reiterated and emblematised on a narrative level, as within the *bildung* narrative one may discern McVeigh's ironic employment of the aesthetic of confessional novel. The typical confessional novel is similarly depicted in a first person, chronolinear narrative, however the central premise is in the protagonist "achieving self-transformation and an end to self-scrutiny by confessing the past" (Radstone 168). Depicting a narrative that includes "shame, doubt or guilt" (Vickroy 135), the protagonist is able to expurgate these emotions cathartically through the 'confession' of his guilt (Radstone 168). The confessional aspect of Mickey's narrative is in the culmination of the novel,

in which he exacts revenge on his father by framing him, implicating him in the murder of a British soldier by planting the weapon used (which his brother, the real perpetrator, was keeping in the dog house outside) under his parents' bed. Mickey then impersonates his father and confesses over the telephone to the police, giving instructions as to the gun's location. His father is summarily interned in prison, freeing Mickey not only to attend St Malachy's due to the financial support his family then receives from the IRA but enabling him to realise his dream of going to America as part of a cross community initiative. The confessional narrative is thus presented inversely or ironically in this respect. Mickey is not at all affected by "shame, doubt or guilt", instead, he has managed to enact his life plan, although he is now, ironically, no longer "the good son". This narrative depicts Mickey's psychological transformation from innocent child into knowing adult, his first deliberate, conscious "wrongful" action. Yet, as McVeigh himself remarks in interview with Jennifer Harvey, "we know that he will not be unscathed by what he's done." Mickey will no doubt come to know and experience the attendant guilt and shame that seem to be contingent upon adult actions.

As a young boy Mickey does not undergo the same level of sexual experience as the other protagonists, yet he does engage in infantilised sexual experiences. Aroused more often by those of the same sex than girls, Mickey's sexuality is consistently fluid and never defined. Innocent and naïve even for his age, Mickey does not experience guilt or shame about these experiences and is more concerned with whether he will grow into a man and get his "man's voice." By restricting the range of the *bildung* narrative, focusing especially on a limited stage of Mickey's life and by depicting Mickey's infantilised yet burgeoning sexuality, McVeigh reflects the contemporary ideation of sexuality's fluid, polymorphic potentiality. *The Good Son's*

depiction subverts the necessity of coming out as any singular, nominal sexual identity and makes us question whether sexuality plays an intrinsic role in identity formation as a whole.

Each of the novels analysed meets the taxonomic definition of the *bildungsroman*, however each employs unique narrative strategies within the genre in order to better articulate and represent the voice of the individual other, “the minority within the minority” (Seamus Deane *ASCG* cover). By utilising the *bildung* form, the authors infuse each narrative with the requisite value of truth, with which any and every reader may empathise, in order to emphasise a potentially universal queer experience in the construction of a queer canon of Northern Irish fiction.

## **2. Queering Sexuality, the Radical Potential of Pluralism**

One of the most common criticisms levelled at gay fiction, gay-authored fiction and the coming-out narrative in particular is that it subtly reinforces the binary, heterodominant narrative by depicting a linear, sexual trajectory that will “always unfold neatly and chronologically until a fixed sexual identity is achieved” (Xhonneux 107). However, as Saxey’s critical constructionist approach asserts, “sexual identities are not innate, ahistorical and cross-cultural, gay identity is not the same at all times and in all places” therefore, there cannot be one “single fundamental identity” (5). Given the inextricable link between the socio-cultural concerns that contextualise the *bildungsroman* and the coming-out narrative, one might argue that by placing these narratives within the socio-political context of Northern Ireland even the most conventional amongst them displays radical political potential. Moreover, these novels can be seen as problematising the essentialist idea of a unified and uniform sexual identity, as they depict a more multiple, polymorphous sexuality, reflective of what Foucault refers to as the “entiresexual mosaic” (*History of Sexuality* 53). Given its pluralistic connotations and nebulous evasion of

definition, in contemporary criticism the term 'queer' has superseded 'gay' as the "specifically political counter to that binarised and hierarchicised sexual categorisation" so associated with heteronormativity (Saxey 72). In depicting sexuality that evades traditional categorisation these authors subvert hierarchical binaries, which has profound radical potential for a Northern Irish society in which binaries have become entrenched.

Of all of these novels, Brian Kennedy's *The Arrival of Fergal Flynn* most clearly conforms to the narrative conventions of the coming-out novel and Fergal's is the most linear trajectory of the protagonists considered. Attracted only to males from the outset and culminating in a loving, monogamous relationship with a gay man, Fergal's teleology parallels Saxey's observation of the traditional coming-out novel that gay identity is depicted as "a matter of emotion, an exclusive sexual and romantic preference for males and a lifelong identity" (41). For the coming-out narrative these ideals of emotion, exclusion and permanence "become the distinguishing characteristics of gay identity" (Saxey 41). It could be argued that this is a somewhat naïve and idealised depiction of homosexuality, its portrayal of a unified, binary gay identity emblematic of the many criticisms that rob the coming-out narrative of its radical political potential. However, it is important to note, as does Saxey, that these conventions are in and of themselves political, as counters to specific homophobic assumptions of homosexuality. The emotional investment of the protagonist, in this case epitomised in Fergal's loving relationship with Father Mac, is seen as a direct "challenge to the homophobic accusation that gay sex is always emotionless and casual" (Saxey 43). By depicting gay sexuality as an exclusive attraction to men, Saxey argues, the author counters the insinuation that gay men could choose to be attracted to women and "demolishes the myth that same-sex desire is a perverse supplement to heterosexuality for a jaded or voracious individual" (43). Finally, the permanence of a lifelong

sexual identity discredits the homophobic assumption that “homosexuality is a passing phase” (Saxey 43). Thus, one may argue that in the narrative of the coming-out novel the construction and depiction of gay or queer homosexuality is politically informed and in constant negotiation with “preceding models of homosexuality” (Saxey 43). Indeed, even the romanticised and idealised sexual relationship between Fergal and Father Mac has radical ramifications, particularly for an insular, and sexually conservative, Northern Ireland. In interview with Róisín Ingle in *The Irish Times* Kennedy notes of his childhood that “When I was growing up the only information we had about homosexuality was that it was evil.” One might argue that even in contemporary Northern Irish society, heterosexuality is still often repressed and homosexuality, when visible, much maligned. Thus, Kennedy’s deliberate portrayal of a positive, loving homosexual relationship, further demonstrates that, far from being divested of radical potentiality, in even the most conventional of coming out novels, “every aspect is a political intervention” (Saxey 53).

However, it would be remiss to restrict analysis of Kennedy’s depiction of gay identity to the narrative of his debut novel. *The Arrival of Fergal Flynn* is not a stand-alone work but rather the first of two novels depicting Fergal Flynn’s sexual trajectory. Kennedy’s second novel, *Roman Song*, published a year later, depicts Fergal’s more nuanced sexual experience. Although the novel culminates similarly, with Fergal finding love and acceptance in a new monogamous homosexual relationship, his trajectory to this point involves various lovers including women. This is perhaps more representative of the author himself who, although averring to be “more homosexual than bisexual”, nonetheless admits to a polymorphic experience of sexuality.

It is perhaps fitting that Jarlath Gregory’s *Snapshots*, the most narratively complex of the novels, is equally nuanced in its diverse depiction of sexuality. The characters in *Snapshots*

depict multiple striations of Foucault's "mosaic of sexuality" with characters aware of, yet reluctant to conform to, the binarised sexual identities associated with heterodominance. From the outset of the novel Oisín is reticent to identify as gay: "It feels right saying you're gay, and it's a relief, but it ties you down. It's like there's no going back. Even if you want to. And you're not coming out" (*Snapshots* 10). Implicit within this statement is a critique of notions of gender essentialism and teleology inherent in the act of coming out. Gregory highlights the assumption that once one has expressed one gender identity in the act of coming out there is a sense of finality, of having established and admitted one fixed sexual identity. Oisín problematises this by regarding one's sexual identity with queer positionality, as a fluid rather than fixed identity, "You can't know who you'll fall in love with next" (*Snapshots* 100). After suggesting that it indeed "might be a girl" he remarks that it would be stupid "to go all the fuss" of coming out only to have to then backtrack (*Snapshots* 10). Just as there is no one universal, fundamental fixed homosexual identity, to imagine the prototypical coming-out experience as one single experience is arguably naive. Just as from a constructionist viewpoint sexuality is in a constant state of negotiation, so too is the process of coming out a continual process that must be enacted on several levels.

Saxey contends that one of the major flaws of the conventional coming-out novel is that with the onus upon constructing and representing a gay male identity, "both politically and culturally", the narrative may omit a plethora of non-binary sexualities (43). She iterates, "Men who enjoy sex with men but do not feel an emotional attachment or romantic investment are excluded. Men who are also sexually attracted to women are excluded. Also, those for whom same-sex desire *is* a phase (no matter how formative or authentic) are excluded" (43). Conversely, however, Gregory not only includes but adds to these representations of multiple



sexualities. Jude is depicted as essentially and exclusively gay, however Oisín represents a potentially plural, more constructionist sexuality. Oisín is propositioned by Liam, apparently prompted by curiosity, although he is depicted as a straight male in a long-term relationship with his girlfriend. Furthermore, both Jude and Oisín each have their first major sexual experience with ostensibly and avowedly straight men, Jude with school friend Mike and Oisín with IRA member Neil. Despite averring their heterosexual identity, both Mike and Neil respectively reveal a history of same-sex experience, ironically juxtaposing the sexual inexperience of the two protagonists who identify as non-heterosexual. Gregory's depictions of non-essentialist sexualities in the novel exemplifies the constructionist belief in "the contingent and socially determined nature of sexuality" (McNay 30). This is epitomised in Jude's assertion that rather than people being born with one essential sexuality, in fact, "lots of people want to try it. Not everyone. Just lots" (*Snapshots* 84).

That both boys have their first sexual experience with straight men, not only speaks to the almost iconic prevalence of such an experience, but also conforms to what Saxey perceives as a universal element of the traditional coming out novel, that the protagonist's first sexual partner be unsuitable. Specifically, according to Saxey, the first sexual partner will almost invariably identify as straight, and secondly, will be interested in sex without any romantic or emotional affiliation (41). By differentiating between 'straight' same-sex encounters as purely physical and 'gay' as denoted by emotional investment, Saxey invests the narrative experience with "the weight of relevance", in that it identifies and reifies that authentic homosexuality is primarily emotional (41). To some extent this is also true of *Snapshots*. The boys' partners are not overtly concerned with romantic or emotional attachment and their same-sex desires are depicted as limited to intercourse. Additionally, the boys' experience is certainly an unsuitable one, both

unsatisfying and borderline violent. Oisín, for example, awakes to find a chorus of bruises “swimming in his skin” (*Snapshots* 65), and Jude is similarly impelled towards violence in his intercourse with Mike, stating that he wanted “to hurt him good” (*Snapshots* 109). When Mike asks why Jude is being forceful Jude reacts by thinking, “Cos you’re not him I felt like saying” (*Snapshots* 109). Indeed, although the protagonists are depicted as solely motivated by sexual impulse, conversely their straight counterparts are depicted as caring and desirous of intimacy, if only within the context of intercourse. Neil is solicitous of Oisín’s inebriated state, offering help and assistance. He approaches Oisín gently, as Oisín recalls, “We quietly began to kiss and his arm folded around me” (*Snapshots* 65). Mike too demonstrates a desire for intimacy, initiating the encounter by asking Jude to kiss him and imploring him to be more gentle. This is an interesting deviation from Saxey’s observations of the typical coming-out narrative. Its inversion, that the protagonists are looking primarily for a sexual encounter rather than a romantic one, destabilises the mythos that only those identifying as straight are focused only on sexual intercourse and that straight men can be gentle and want emotional connection from homosexual intercourse. That Oisín and Jude’s intercourse at the end of the novel is much less violent and depicted more sympathetically does seem to iterate Saxey’s point, however, that rewarding homosexual sex comes from an emotional attachment between two monogamous partners. However, given the open-ended nature of the narrative one may similarly argue that Gregory is depicting that the various attitudes towards intercourse are as varied as the sexualities performing them.

Couched within the context of late nineties Northern Ireland, Gregory’s depiction of sexuality in *Snapshots* is rarely independent of political connotations. Potentially the most radical of these is Gregory’s unique portrayal of a queer IRA soldier. This interesting

juxtaposition of queer sexuality and macho combatant has implications for masculinity, a point which will be discussed in detail in the following section. However, even from the perspective of Neil's sexual history, "a one-night stand in a youth hostel with some English bloke" (*Snapshots* 65), one may discern the radical transgressive potential of queer sexuality. That Neil, who espouses the Republican ideology of the IRA and resents British occupancy, even killing a British soldier, has enjoyed sexual congress with an English man, suggests that sexuality at least transcends politics. Similarly, young Catholic Jude, after surreptitiously purchasing his first gay magazine, describes masturbating to a picture of a black man "with short bleached hair and combats" (*Snapshots* 75). This onanistic act is potentially doubly subversive as not only is his focus on a black man, radical enough at a time when Northern Ireland was particularly insular and had little ethnic diversity, but the description also has militaristic implications. As noted in relation to McVeigh's *The Good Son*, most of Northern Irish society's exposure to those of another race came through encounters with British army servicemen stationed in the province. This association is further compounded by the depiction of the model as wearing the style of combat trousers, so named after their military counterparts (Loschek 349). Thus, the model's very clothing seems to evoke connections with the British Army, a particularly taboo fantasy for a young Catholic boy.

Jeanine Woods in her article "Trans-formations of Gendered Identities in Ireland" comments that there is a "not-uncommon view of non-heteronormative discursive practices as divorced from the 'properly' political" (32). Jarlath Gregory's *Snapshots* may not be consciously politically motivated, indeed the protagonists and the majority of their peers are depicted as decidedly apolitical in stance. However, by depicting the queerness and plurality of sexuality, Gregory dissolves the binaries not only of sexual identity, but also subverts and undermines the

political binaries that have so long defined a nation. As Oisín himself reflects, “how little I care if you call me Irish or British. You might as well ask if I’m gay or straight. The questions carry all these assumptions that have nothing to do with my life” (*Snapshots* 166). *A Son Called Gabriel* has the largest scope of the novels, spanning fourteen years of the protagonist’s life from the ages of six to roughly twenty years of age. It seems suitable, given the nature of the narrative as an anti-coming-out novel, that this span delineates a long, complex and problematic sexual trajectory.

*A Son Called Gabriel* absorbs and reflects many of the conventions of the coming-out novel, however Gabriel’s sexual trajectory is almost inverted when compared to that of the traditional coming-out narrative, as he moves from a sense of normalisation and acceptance to confusion and alienation. The traditional climax of the coming-out novel is similarly inverted to ironic effect; Gabriel’s coming out is not the “strategically liberating act” (Xhonneux 99) that typifies the genre, but rather the antithesis. Gabriel is forced to repress and deny his sexuality and identity further. His sexual teleology is further compounded by an experience of sexual abuse which, although an isolated incident and one from which Gabriel is depicted as moving on, nonetheless has lasting ramifications for his construction of sexual identity. Gabriel has six sexual partners in the novel and one may discern two sexual trajectories, one with three male partners he has in the novel, and one with three women. These trajectories juxtapose, intersect and overlap each other, reflecting the inner conflict of Gabriel’s mind and problematising traditional teleology. By depicting a range of sexual experience with both genders, one would assume that McNicholl is representing a pluralist, constructed representation of sexuality, a radical displacement of traditional heteronormative binaries, however this may not truly be the case as there is a detectable undercurrent of essentialist bias underpinning the novel.

The traditional coming-out novel is sometimes criticised for its essentialist depiction of sexuality, namely that the protagonist has a pre-existing sexuality and that this drives the narrative. Xhonneux suggests “that sexual identities come first, and that the already existing character of a gay or lesbian individual will therefore generate an exemplary story” (97). Gabriel seems to conform to essentialist expectations, as his formative sexual inclinations are depicted as naturally and essentially homosexual. At the age of just six Gabriel observes a statuesque, bronzed gentleman at the beach, his body “a healthy brown, and water droplets glittered like tiny diamonds over his legs and chest” (*ASCG* 60). Gabriel’s first reaction is on an emotional level, “my heart skipped another beat. I couldn’t understand what was happening” (*ASCG* 60). However, his reactions become more overtly sexualised as he darts under the man’s towel to watch him change out of his trunks, “I don’t know why. I needed to see him there” (*ASCG* 60). Gabriel’s behaviour exemplifies Saxey’s observation that in the coming-out novel the protagonist’s sense of difference is depicted as “predating a sophisticated comprehension of gender or sexuality” (48). It is important to note that McNicholl’s presentation of Gabriel’s homosexual inclination is essential and inherently part of his identity, as it serves the subtext that, as essential, homosexuality cannot be fought.

Gabriel’s formative homosexual experience is with a slightly older boy, Noel, who “still a bit of a boy, too,” initiates Gabriel into same-gender sex play (*ASCG* 332). He initially introduces Gabriel to heterosexual ‘dirty magazines’, then their sex play escalates as they attempt to recreate scenes from the magazine. Their play takes the form of reciprocal oral sex, which Noel instigates. Initially reluctant, Noel assures Gabriel that he will enjoy the experience: “That’s why boys do it to one another. It’s just so good” (*ASCG* 98). Gabriel finds that he does enjoy the ‘game’ although he is mystified by the “lovely pains” he experiences, “All I knew was

that I enjoyed them, couldn't understand why I was having them" (*ASCG* 100). McNicholl is not the only author to portray an active homosexual childhood. Saxey, in her analysis of Fricke's autobiography *Reflections of a Rock Lobster*, describes Fricke's depiction of "same-sex desire as endemic in boys" (Saxey 48). Indeed, Fricke asserts that, "By first grade I was sexually active with many friends. In fact, a small group of us regularly met in the grammar school lavatory to perform fellatio on one another" (*ROARL* 13). One may discern the radical political potential in depicting same-sex experiences as both prevalent and normative; this is potentially transgressive "in that it posits same-sex desires as natural and shows that it really is everywhere" (Saxey 58). Fricke remarks of these experiences that, "None of us had any guilty feelings about it; we figured everyone did it. Why shouldn't they?" (*ROARL* 13). Noel explains, in what amounts to a childlike explication of the spectrum of queer sexuality, "Lots of boys do it, so you needn't worry. Some only do it with girls. Others do it with boys and girls both" (*ASCG* 133). When Gabriel, seeking reassurance asks, "So there's nothing wrong with it then?" Noel, like Fricke, emphatically replies "Not one single thing" (*ASCG* 133). Thus, Gabriel begins his sexual trajectory believing that queer sexuality is natural and normative, however, his mother soon disabuses him of this notion, stating that same-sex intercourse is unnatural and thus instigating his inverse sexual trajectory. To Gabriel's belief that "sexual intercourse was such a wonderful gift from God that it was for all kinds of people to enjoy together" she quickly retorts, "Well now you know better" (*ASCG* 138). The use of irony here emphasises Gabriel's naturally pluralistic view of sexuality as inclusive and positive, and his mother's as exclusive and negative.

Later in the novel, Gabriel, now a teenager, begins a sexual relationship with his cousin and classmate, Connor. Gabriel's relationship with ostensibly straight Connor exemplifies Saxey's observation of the gay/straight sexual encounter as typical of the coming-out novel. The

boys rationalise the experience as exempt from homosexuality by framing it within a heterosexual context, with Connor initiating the encounters by describing his exploits with girlfriend Rosellen. As Gabriel remarks, “So long as he talked about her, everything was fine and we couldn’t possibly be poofs” (*ASCG* 195). However, Connor exemplifies the typically straight-identifying, “unsuitable partner” Saxey observes as critical to the coming-out narrative, “who will continue to desire women and eventually give up male/male sex” (Saxey 42). Connor ends the sexual relationship with Gabriel stating that, “We should be concentrating on girls full time. If we don’t we might turn ourselves into queers” (*ASCG* 232). Gabriel conforms to the narrative expectations of sensitive and emotional queer protagonist as he clearly wants more from the relationship and is devastated when Connor ends it, wondering, “How can he be so selfish?” (*ASCG* 233).

Left in an emotionally vulnerable position, Gabriel falls victim to Father Cornelius, who touches Gabriel inappropriately. The abuse is depicted briefly and description is scant; the molestation is implied but not explicit. More time is given to Gabriel’s attendant feelings of confusion and shame. For Gabriel these emotions become inextricably linked with his burgeoning homosexuality, exacerbating his already problematic sexual teleology. Gabriel believes that Father Cornelius deliberately singled him out for abuse by sensing Gabriel’s difference. He asks the priest directly, “Why me, Father? Is there something about me that told you I’m not normal?” (*ASCG* 249). McNicholl depicts Gabriel’s conflicting anger and sense of complicity in some detail, however after only one subsequent chapter the matter is ostensibly resolved. Having told his ‘uncle’ Brendan about the abuse, Father Cornelius is dealt with in a matter typical of the Catholic Church, particularly at the time in which the novel is set. Cornelius is summarily shipped off to England temporarily to “seek treatment for his illness” (*ASCG* 275),

until such time as he should desire to return, and all involved are admonished to remain silent on the matter, “None shall be the wiser and Father’s otherwise exemplary teaching record will not be tarnished” (*ASCG* 275). This last rather ironic statement serves as an inherent critique of the Catholic Church and its attitude toward paedophiles. For Gabriel, however, this action seems to be sufficient, as he remarks “I felt so much better. I discovered I also lost the hate I’d had for Father Cornelius. Only a thin slice of resentment lingered because Father Cornelius would get treatment for the sickness, and I had to nurse mine alone” (*ASCG* 276). The main consequence of this experience for Gabriel is his assumption that Father Cornelius’ sickness is not his paedophilic molestation of children, but the homosexual nature of his actions, thus compounding Gabriel’s belief that his sexuality is aberrant.

One could criticise the brevity with which McNicholl depicts Gabriel’s sexual abuse, as rather than focusing on the incident it appears almost as a narrative device to fit into the overarching structure, another landmark in Gabriel’s sexual trajectory that further complicates and exacerbates his sexual crisis. However, there can be no doubt about the verisimilitude of the experience and the profound, debilitating implications an experience like this would have for one’s construction of sexual identity.

Considering the interlacing nature of the two sexual trajectories, it is pertinent at this juncture to include an examination of Gabriel’s experiences with women up to this point. Gabriel’s encounter with Lizzie parallels and juxtaposes his relations with Connor as the two literally overlap. Taking their partners to a secluded area, the two couples separately but simultaneously engage in sexual activity with Gabriel paying close attention to Connor in order to mimic his behaviour. Gabriel quickly and quite clearly becomes aroused by Lizzie as she begins to touch and stroke him, “I felt on fire as she raked my roots” (*ASCG* 210). However,



Lizzie's unfortunate perfume choice suddenly reminds him of his "Aunt Bernie's perfumed stink from childhood" which subsequently and summarily quells his ardour (*ASCG* 210). Rather than rationalising the incident as an unfortunate coincidence Gabriel immediately relegates his "performance issues" to an inherent inability to be physically attracted to women. He compares feeling not even "the tiniest stirring" with Lizzie after recollecting his aunt, to his arousal with Connor later that night which "ballooned faster than a flat bicycle tube being pumped" (*ASCG* 211). This incident marks the conclusion of his casual relationship with Lizzie, but not his dogged pursuit of a heteronormative sexual trajectory. Gabriel's sexual encounter with Donegal nurse Bridget is much less ambiguous. Meeting by chance while Bridget is on holiday, they initiate a casual sexual encounter. Gabriel is surprised by the alacrity of his physical response to her as he becomes increasingly aroused. Excited by the contrast between "the soft pliability of breast and rough hardness of nipple" Gabriel subconsciously engenders the experience, "I had never known a woman's body could have such manly roughness amid its feminine softness" (*ASCG* 296). However, it is her decidedly female physicality that arouses him most, "Never had I felt such liquid warmth. I kissed, feasted, probed" (*ASCG* 297). Their congress however, is rudely interrupted as the landlady, who, awoken by a drunken guest, intrudes upon them and promptly evicts Gabriel from the house. Gabriel is initially deliriously happy that his "body had responded the way it was supposed to" (*ASCG* 298) and repeatedly fantasises about Bridget's breasts, noting that each time he does he successfully becomes aroused. However, this relief is short-lived as the author immediately interpolates a reminder of Gabriel's "inherent" homosexuality. Gabriel spies a young man, "an attractive football player type", and fantasises about him while masturbating. This occurrence appears a little contrived, undermining as it does his sexual attraction to women yet serves as a clear and timely reminder that Gabriel cannot

escape the spectre of homosexuality. Although the novel seems to suggest that Gabriel is inherently gay, there is indeed a likely possibility that he is indeed bisexual or queer.

Gabriel's final relationship is with wealthy Protestant show jumper, Fiona. Their relationship is strained from the outset as it crosses socio-economic and ethnonationalist divides. It is interesting to note that Fiona is portrayed as quite emotionally and sexually detached, so that to an extent her characterisation mirrors Gabriel's emotional and sexual unavailability. As Gabriel remarks, "Fiona and I had progressed to the heavy petting stage, but in all honesty it gave me no great pleasure" (*ASCG* 319). This sentiment appears to be shared by Fiona as he observes that "Fiona didn't appear to be very eager" in this regard either (*ASCG* 319). Their chaste simulacrum of a relationship is juxtaposed with Gabriel's final same-sex encounter. At a charity event they both attend, Gabriel initiates a chance sexual encounter with a stranger, an encounter that he recounts as amounting to "a flurry of excited fumbling that culminated in my gratification" (*ASCG* 325). Gabriel's fevered and desperate sexual experience marks a watershed moment in his sexual trajectory. He remarks, "I had desired and initiated an illicit encounter. I had seized an opportunity to lure and seduce a stranger" and by doing so he could no longer "assuage the guilt by clinging to my ultimate defence that I was the passive participant" (*ASCG* 327). This incident compels him to confess to his mother, which culminates in the final, ironic displacement of the traditional coming-out novel. Gabriel's coming out, as mentioned previously, becomes an act of incarceration rather than liberation, as the misplaced sentiments of his family force him back into the 'closet'.

Though McNicholl's depiction of Gabriel's limited, but nonetheless valid, sexual success with women could point towards a polyfocal view of sexuality, existing within a continuum rather than a binary, the constant juxtaposition of successful homosexual experiences points

towards a more essentialist depiction of sexuality. For this novel, however, the essentialist portrayal of sexuality is a narratological imperative. By depicting Gabriel as *essentially* gay McNicholl counters the well-meaning, but nonetheless homophobic, claim made by his family that homosexuality is a “passing phase”. In presenting Gabriel’s heterosexual teleology as repeatedly confounded by homosexual desire he illustrates that, for Gabriel, homosexuality is not something that can be fought nor is heterosexuality something that can be learned. Yet at the same time, although Gabriel’s experience of sexuality is not necessarily plural or bisexual, it does not follow that McNicholl’s overall presentation of sexuality is binary. That Gabriel is ultimately forced to see his sexuality as binarised is a result and a critique of Northern Irish society, which has enforced heteronormative binarism upon him. Gabriel, like Noel, begins his journey with the innate understanding that sexuality is plural, and that sexuality is “for all kinds of people to enjoy together” (*ASCG* 138) and incorporates a broad spectrum. Through his child characters McNicholl demonstrates the implicit understanding that male sexuality encompasses a broad continuum; to refer to Noel’s apropos description, “Lots of boys do it... Some only do it with girls. Others do it with boys and girls both” (*ASCG* 133).

Saxey posits that those characters in gay fiction who “fail to achieve a gay identity” define that identity by their very failure to achieve it. She asserts that for gay identity “to be associated with agency, authenticity and intelligence, these characters must embody stagnation, hypocrisy and stupidity” (132). That Gabriel fails to achieve a gay identity, however, is not as Saxey posits, indicative of a failure on his part. In McNicholl’s portrayal it is society not the individual that embodies “stagnation, hypocrisy and stupidity” and in so doing he ensures that his depiction is inherently politically transgressive.

Positioning a child as the central protagonist of queer fiction is in itself a radically political act, with many ramifications for our understanding of queer and heterosexual development, and it also draws our attention to the inherent binary contradictions of Western attitudes towards children. As Kathryn Stockton elucidates, the central contradiction lies within society's "tendency to treat all children as straight while we culturally consider them heterosexual" (283). This is indicative of society's heterosexist need to place children from birth within a heteronormative narrative. However, as Kelleher suggests in his chapter "How to Do Things with Perversion", a child "is not born, but rather *becomes* normal" (154-155). Bruhm and Hurley, in their seminal text *Curioser: On the Queerness of Children*, unilaterally attest that regardless of sexual orientation, "Children are queer. Their sexual behaviour and their sexual knowledge are subjected to unusually intense normalising surveillance, discipline, and repression of the sort familiar to any oppressed sexual minority" (110). Thus, Paul McVeigh's novel *The Good Son* is poised in perfect counterpoint to the heterosexist assumptions of childhood sexuality; however, it also challenges Lee Edelman's criticism that employing a child protagonist is self-defeating, as children serve as a signifier of "reproductive futurity, the continuing repetition of the established order, and the suppression of change" (19). Edelman contends that the "cult of the child" permits "no shrines to the queerness of boys and girls, since queerness... is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end" (19). Paul McVeigh's novel, depicting only several months of protagonist Mickey Donnelly's life, refutes this by not employing those "strategies of closure" implied by the sexual teleology Saxey identifies in coming-of age narratives. Rather, Mickey's sexuality is presented as in constant evolution, plural and elastic in its rejection of binary taxonomic identification, ultimately and decidedly queer.

Like Gabriel, Mickey's formative sexual experiences (although experiments would perhaps be the accurate term in the case of the latter) include both boys and girls. However, for Mickey, throughout the novel these sexual impulses remain nebulous and nascent. Mickey's first love is the angelic Martine, for whom, in Mickey's vivid imagination, "cherubs fly out of the stained-glass windows above and trumpet down to hover over her" (*TGS* 21). Mickey's initial 'love' for Martine, however, is childish infatuation, predicated equally upon her "long, blonde hair" and the fact that "she has a garage. She's so lucky" (*TGS* 21). Later in the novel however, Mickey's infatuation with Martine does acquire incumbent stirrings of sexual desire.

Appropriating his sister's Girls' World mannequin head, which Mickey places in sight of Martine but in the background, he describes kissing the mannequin "on the mouth while lookin' at Martine behind. I try the way they kiss on the TV. My dick throbs" (*TGS* 56). It is interesting that Mickey utilises a female simulacrum for this performance of heterosexuality, as his feelings are no more for Martine than the dummy itself, built upon his ideation of Martine rather than the reality. Indeed, despite his prepubescent sexual stirrings, including, at one point, his arousal at an only vaguely sexual dream about Martine, his actual sexual experience with Martine leaves much to be desired. Upon spending time with her, he realises she is not the person he imagined her to be and remarks, "The more I stare at her face the more different she looks... She's still gorgeous but not her" (*TGS* 201). In an attempt to teach her to "lumber" (a colloquialism referring to sexual intercourse which Mickey mistakes as "French kissing") he realises that he is not sexually aroused by her "except in my head" (*TGS* 201). When his not "so sweet and gentle" (*TGS* 69) Martine remarks that he is not "gettin' hard" Mickey is clearly repulsed by her: "I near swallow my tongue. My Martine isn't like that" (*TGS* 201). In fact, Mickey can only become aroused by imagining kissing the Girl's World mannequin, with its "cool, plastic lips... No slime. No

tongues. No weirdness” (*TGS* 202). Though it is possible to interpret this as symbolic of Mickey’s empty performance of heterosexuality, it is perhaps more indicative of his sexual immaturity. Mickey’s attraction to Martine is evident on an emotional rather than a sexual level, and he teaches Martine to lumber only so that they may become boyfriend and girlfriend. Martine, however, promptly rejects Mickey, “how could we? No one likes you Mickey. And the way you get on like a wee girl. Are you gay Mickey?” (*TGS* 202). The accusation of being “gay” is expressive of Mickey’s perceived effeminacy rather than sexual inclination, which although devastating and confusing for Mickey, considering his prepubescence, lacks the same demoralising influence on his construction of identity that it has for Gabriel.

Nevertheless, the performance of sexuality, particularly heterosexuality, is also implied in Mickey’s tentative sexual encounters with local glue sniffer and notorious “dirtbird”, Theresa McAllister. Accosted by Theresa, Micky finds himself in somewhat of a quagmire as in order to prove his masculinity, as he observes, “You have to lumber a girl even if she’s ugly, cuz if you don’t you’re a big poof. But if I said that I lumbered Theresa McAllister everyone would sleg me cuz she’s an ugly stinker” (*TGS* 140). Despite this quandary, Mickey resolutely endeavours to continue his sexual exploration, by lightly and briefly touching Theresa’s vagina through her underwear. Mickey is satisfied that this perfunctory performance of sexual advances is enough to demonstrate his masculinity: “I’ve touched a fanny. I wish I could tell the boys” (*TGS* 142).

Same-sex attraction in the novel, it could be argued, is depicted with an essentialist bias, although these experiences are also more implied than expounded upon. The most explicit example of this in the novel is when Mickey and his best friend, the unfortunately nick-named Fartin’ Martin, look at the lingerie section of a catalogue. This has thematic parallels to Gabriel’s formative sexual experience using dirty magazines in *A Son Called Gabriel*, as the homoerotic

elements are implied and performed within a heterosexual context. Fartin' sits next to Mickey putting one half of the catalogue on his own leg the other on Mickey's and then proceeds to masturbate under the catalogue while commenting on the pictures. While Mickey becomes aroused by Martin's behaviour he does not understand the implications of "the catalogue movin' up and down from underneath" remarking only that "Fartin's definitely doin' somethin' down there. But he can do anythin' he wants... Nobody would say anythin' to Mad Fartin' Martin" (*TGS* 84-85). Shortly after Martin returns from an impromptu visit to the bathroom, he notices Mickey's erection, and almost as an afterthought, touches it. Being sure to "check there's no Brits" Mickey describes how Martin "rubs his bum back til it's against me. My hard on feels hot against him. He moves from side to side lookin' up and down the street rubbin' on me" (*TGS* 86). The encounter ends as suddenly as it began and Martin then runs down the street for Mickey to chase after him. Unlike Gabriel, Mickey seems not at all worried about the implications of this event and is subsequently happily distracted by the excitement of a potential riot. The only occasion on which Mickey begins to associate shame with being aroused by a male is much later in the novel, when he becomes infatuated with the hairy legs of a French student volunteering in a cross- community venture. At first, he is impressed by the man's embodied maturity and masculinity, two attributes he desperately desires: "When I grow up I want really hairy legs. I'd be a real man then" (*TGS* 182). However, the attention begins to become sexualised, "I can't stop starin' at his hairy legs. I want to touch them. The bottom of my belly sinks in. Somethin's going on in my pants" (*TGS* 183). It is only at this juncture Mickey begins to sense that there is something 'wrong' with his behaviour, "I feel scared or somethin'. Lookin' up, Pierre has a strange look on his face. I shouldn't have been starin'" (*TGS* 183). This nascent sense of guilt is only compounded by Pierre's reaction as Mickey realises, "Somethin' has changed. He doesn't want

to be my friend anymore” (*TGS* 183). Though this experience is undoubtedly upsetting, Mickey does not ruminate on the ramifications of these new sensations and his childlike mind is quick to move on to the next new experience.

It is poignant that, particularly in comparison to Gabriel, Mickey’s teleology from innocence to experience and adulthood is not one delineated or perpetuated by a sexual trajectory. His loss of innocence is a result of his own responsibility for the loss of his dog Killer (killed by a bomb explosion, as Mickey walks him in an area of town strictly prohibited by his mother) and culminates in the betrayal of his father. That this is a confessional novel in which the queer protagonist feels no need to confess his sexuality is politically radical. Whatever sexual identity Mickey will grow up to adopt is not the issue; rather, in presenting this timeline of a child still negotiating his identity and sexuality, sexual identity is neither a fixed binary, nor is coming out the primary aim or conclusion of the novel. McVeigh’s work is radically transgressive as it counters Edelman’s claims that children cannot be queer and in so doing redresses what Eve Sedgwick refers to as “the ongoing cultural erasure of queer kids” (142). In their depiction of the plurality of sexualities these authors destabilise the traditional binaries that underpin Northern Irish society, without “labelling, constricting identities” (Saxey 143). This kind of complex, exploratory identity work is essential to a post-conflict Northern Irish society that is attempting to move on from a politically binarised past into a potentially pluralist and inclusive society.

### **3. Queering Masculinities: Locating and Locuting the Masculine ‘Other’**

As Tommaso Milano notes, “Queering masculinities is a semantically ambiguous title” (260). As he explains, if one is to assume “masculinities” is the agent of “queering” then it follows that one is dealing with a masculine modality that engenders “some kind of queer characteristic” (260).



Conversely, if one is to consider masculinities as “patient” then the act of “queering” masculinities connotes the academic examination of masculinities within the “queer” epistemological spectrum (Milano 260). This section is an exploration into both ‘queer’ masculinities and the process of ‘queering’ masculinities. This has important repercussions for the construction and depiction of masculinities in Northern Ireland, a society which, even today, remains highly binarised and privileges heteronormativity and hypermasculinity, ideologies which perpetuate and “sustain sectarianism” (Kitchen 205). The depiction of alternative modes of masculinity is radically transgressive in not only vocalising the multiplicity of male experience but in constituting and producing alternative masculinities. Since primacy has been given to the dominant, hegemonic masculinity for so long, it is crucial to locate and emancipate the masculine “other” from the hierarchical binary, a notion long perceived as Sarah Gilmartin notes for *The Irish Times*, as “a threat or an evil is ingrained in both the political sphere and behind closed doors”.

Saxey forewarns of the dangers in depicting a single unifying and universal portrayal of the stereotypical gay man, critiquing the too often clichéd and formulaic representations found in gay fiction. She describes how, almost unilaterally, the protagonist in the coming-out novel is defined by “feelings of loneliness and difference; failing to identify as masculine in traditional terms; being intelligent and with a keen appreciation of art and literature; experiencing a tense and hostile relationship with one’s father” (40). Certainly much, if not all, of this relates to each of the protagonists studied here. Thus, there is a danger that in depicting a singular gay experience, defined as antithetical to the hegemonic construction of masculinity, one is serving to reinforce intragender binarism, which is potentially regressive as opposed to transgressive. However, in social and literary histories where the gay voice has gone unheard, this is still doing

important masculinities work. Indeed, by expressing the hitherto unexpressed these novels serve to both construct and reconstruct queer male identity, which in turn provides a lexicon and experience with which others can identify.

As David Plummer observes in his text *One of the Boys: Masculinity, Homophobia and Modern Manhood*, the construction of hegemonic masculinity is predicated upon heterosexist dictates. What he terms “hegemonic boyhood” is based emphatically on how *not* to behave: “A growing boy should not be a baby ... A boy should not share characteristics with girls ... A boy should not separate from boys’ groups or be a loner ... A boy should not be weak or cowardly... A young boy should not be sexually ‘deviant’” (76). In this prescription, emphasis is placed on the ‘normalcy’ of the dominant hegemonic masculinity, thus othering and devaluing the subordinate masculinity as defined by alterity, its difference from the norm. As John Nagle similarly concurs, “Hegemonic masculinity legitimates homophobia as it valorises a form of heterosexual identity sustained by hatred for gay men who are seen as the antithesis of ‘normal’ male identity” (4). These restrictive prescriptions have profoundly problematic implications, not only for the non-heterosexual boy, but potentially for heterosexual boys that do not conform to this overarching decree. Much of the enforcement of these masculinist ideals is evident in a child’s formative years, enacted in the familiar but often fraught “social geography” of the school playground (Plummer 86).

Indeed, the playground is depicted as the primary site of the regulation and differentiation of masculinity as experienced by each of the protagonists in the novels. The trauma that takes place there is intrinsic to their construction of masculine identity and often the catalyst for awakening their inherent and iconic sense of difference’. Nearly all of the protagonists emulate Saxey’s observation of the typical protagonists in queer fiction, each displaying incumbent

intelligence and artistic proclivities, from artist Oisín, opera singer Fergal, early school starter and poetry lover Gabriel, to Mickey Donnelly's love of drama, and even Jude who, although mostly interested in science, also shares a love of art with Oisín. These traits are sufficient to single the boys out from their peers, but they are further isolated precisely according to Plummer's observations of what a hegemonic boy "should not" be. Emotionally demonstrative outbursts, such as crying, contravene the dictates that a boy should not "be a baby" and that they must appear "tough and not cowardly". The protagonists themselves become increasingly aware of the need to perform and conform to these strictures of masculinity, whilst simultaneously realising the 'otherness' of their behaviour. As Gabriel notes, "I wanted to cry and bang my head hard to stop the thoughts. But banging my head was useless, crying was feminine" (*ASCG* 233). Both Oisín in *Snapshots* and Mickey in *The Good Son* are depicted as being brought to tears in public, for which they are quickly reprimanded by their respective brothers who enforce masculine norms. Oisín's brother Sean in his retrospective analysis of their differing masculinities denounces his brother for acting like a baby: "'I remember when Oisín came home crying from school...sniff sniff mewl', he snivelled. 'He was curled up on Mum's shoulder'" (*Snapshots* 146, 147). Mickey's elder brother Paddy holds and squeezes Mickey by the neck which makes Mickey cry, to which Paddy retorts, "And stop friggin' cryin' like a wee girl" (*TGS* 60). Even as a child, young Gabriel notes that "Boys were expected to be tough, assertive, to show no feminine qualities because that was an inexcusable sign of weakness" (*ASCG* 185). The devaluing of the feminine as inauthentic is further compounded by the admonition that boys "should not share characteristics with girls" (Plummer 76). The identification with girls is a quality that the protagonists share almost unilaterally (excepting Jude, an important exemption which will be discussed later), and is almost always presented within the socio-cultural space of the

playground. As Plummer observes, particularly in primary school (as is congruent with the depiction in each of the novels) the playground is clearly demarcated along intergender lines, and any transgression across these lines is summarily punished. Gabriel and Oisín's incursion into these segregated, "culturally quarantined spaces" serves as formative experience of gendered difference to hegemonic masculinity (110). Oisín's older brother Sean reflects on Oisín's association and perhaps identification with girls, remarking that he "had friends at school. They were all girls" (*Snapshots* 144). Oisín often skips with girls in the girls' yard, which to Sean is considered "Forbidden territory" (*Snapshots* 147). Oisín's perceived gender transgressions pass by mostly unmentioned, yet tension nonetheless mounts and culminates in a decisive and traumatic experience. A football is kicked from the boys' yard into the girls', prompting the boys to demand that Oisín conform to masculine expectation and kick back the ball. As Sean relates, "it must have been like the whole school was waiting to see if he could kick the ball or not" (*Snapshots* 148). As Oisín stands unmoving, Sean implores his brother to respond to the implied gender challenge, "Jesus Christ Oisín, kick the fucking ball!" and "kick the ball you little queer" (*Snapshots* 148). The pejorative use of the word queer in this instance is demonstrative of his brother's perception of Oisín as having failed the implied challenge of masculinity. Indeed, the ball is actually drop-kicked back to the boys' playground by one of the girls, however this is not seen as an act of gender transgression. Instead it merely serves to reinforce Oisín's perceived lack of masculinity. This entire event is overseen by a teacher, who reinforces the gender binary by physically dragging Oisín to the boys' yard and demanding that he remain there. This is a particularly evocative depiction when understood in a Northern Irish context; it is as if, to borrow a local colloquialism, it does not matter which foot you kick the ball with, as long as you kick the ball. The connotation is that it does not matter whether you are Catholic or Protestant (implied by

which foot kicks the ball) as long as you conform to masculine expectations (performed by kicking the football). In a very similar situation, Gabriel too is forced out of the girls' yard as he describes how the school bully, Henry, and some other boys "started to come around to where I played with the girls and would cause me trouble. They'd try to trip me up as I ran around trying to free the girls from jail" (*ASCG* 15). When Gabriel's adoptive father asks why he doesn't play football, Gabriel relates how his brother Fergal told him that "I didn't play because I preferred playing with girls" (*ASCG* 15). Gabriel is then pressured into conforming to masculinist ideals by being forced to play football with his male compatriots. Mickey Donnelly too is depicted at the age in which inter- and intra-gender differentiation is becoming more pronounced. Though the boys and girls play together, when the girls announce that they will play "skips" the reaction of the boys is one of repulsion at such a feminine game, "Skips? Decky looks disgusted ... He walks away and the boys follow" (*TGS* 85). Mickey is superficially aware that he should conform to masculine expectations, but feels conflicted, as he attests, "I should really go off with the boys" but he identifies with the "sensitive" girls, and besides, "I'm actually brilliant at skips" (*TGS* 58). Mickey stays to play with the girls, however he does attempt to conform somewhat to masculine expectation as he remarks, and "I skip like I've never skipped before. Shitely" (*TGS* 59). Despite Mickey's display of masculine bravado his brother nonetheless remarks, "And stop playin' with the wee girls, fer fucks sake. You're too old for all of that now" (*TGS* 59). His next statement has especial significance as he warns Mickey of the potential ramifications of not conforming to gender rules: "The boys are all laughin' at you. Jesus, they're goin' to murder you in St. Gabes" (*TGS* 60). In order to conform to hegemonic boyhood, each boy "should express affinity with groups of other boys" (Plummer 86), so as not to be considered "loners and boys who seem unacceptably different" (Plummer 101). Each of the boys in these novels, however, is

unacceptably different, ostracised because of their perceived difference. This serves as a perpetuating cycle: the boys are rejected due to their difference and become isolated, the boys are perceived as isolated and alone and so they are ostracised. It is interesting to note that what is perceived as a weakness in a male child is regarded as a strength in adulthood. Mickey discovers this in his conversation with Pierre, who remarks that Mickey is a loner, to which Mickey responds, “No I’m not!” Does he think I’m a weirdo?” (*TGS* 181). Pierre reassures him that in fact loner means, “Strong. Adult” (*TGS* 181). Nonetheless, all the boys are identified as other and ostracised in the playground. Despite the innocuous label of ‘playground’, it is pertinent to note that for the protagonists, as “for children who find themselves marginalised and the target of homophobia, the school ground is conceptualised in terms of danger zones and safety zones” (Plummer 110). These socio-cultural lines echo the similarly demarcated geopolitical topography of Northern Ireland, in which punishment is also meted out for transgression. The violence Paddy warns of that may result from Mickey’s non-masculinist visibility mirrors the ideology of a society, particularly during the Troubles, in which visibility meant vulnerability. As Sarah Gilmartin reflects in *The Irish Times*, this is an environment where “being different has dangerous, sometimes deadly consequences.” As Mickey Donnelly articulates, the pressure to conform to the hypermasculine ideal in Northern Irish society is culturally and politically omnipresent and intrinsically linked to danger and violence, “You’re supposed to say *Right* and nod up if you pass boys you don’t know. If you don’t you could be a Prod, so they’ll beat you up. Or you’re scared of them, so they’ll beat you up” (*TGS* 73).

Being so firmly identified as that which is other problematises the protagonists’ construction of masculine identity. Mickey’s teleology, though limited, adroitly indicates his cross-gender identification. At the start of the novel he remarks, “I picture my circle soul now and it’s

definitely pink. I just won't tell anybody my soul's a girl's one" (*TGS* 20). Later, considering how the other boys ostracise him, Mickey reflects that, "I'm not really a boy. No man's land. Limbo" (*TGS* 58). Unable to draw the distinction between masculine homosocial touching and what constitutes "gay touching," Mickey blames his confusion on a lack of masculinity, "It's cuz I'm not a real boy, I don't know when it's gay or not" (*TGS* 83). This confusion about gender and sexuality arises from and is demonstrated by the use of homosexual pejoratives, particularly by children. Plummer attests that for children up to the age of pubescence, these terms, for example "poofter", do not have a sexual dimension; rather, it "is a cumulative repository for everything a growing boy should not be" (87). Plummer identifies how the childhood, pre-sexual use of poofter (which is interchangeable with any other similar pejoratives) "does not equate neatly with femininity – both signify "otherness to masculinity" (87). Thus, he creates a third option outside of the hierarchical binary of hegemonic masculinity and "emphasised femininity" (Connell 183), which he terms "the virtual homosexual" (Plummer 88). The virtual homosexual is a powerful symbol of masculine otherness, particularly "during the differentiation (ordering) of heterosexual masculinity" (Plummer 87-8). By emphasising and articulating masculine otherness as outside of this binary, Plummer destabilises the hierarchical, intragender binary and opens up the plurality of masculine experience.

Saxey makes mention of the ubiquity in depicting the gay or queer male protagonist with a concurrently difficult relationship with the father. If one considers the role of the father as embodying traditional masculinities of previous generations, it becomes clear how potentially problematic this relationship could be. Indeed, each of the protagonists in the novels exemplifies this paradigm in their paternal, familial relations. Both Jude and Mickey's fathers are majoritively absent and both are depicted as alcoholics. Gabriel's relationship with his father is

central to McNicholl's novel. The title, *A Son Called Gabriel*, ironically references the fact that the man Gabriel believes to be his father is actually his uncle, symbolically epitomising the distance between them. Gabriel's father physically abuses his son for his perceived lack of masculinity, believing it to be the result of weakness, "Every house has to have a gentleman who doesn't like getting his hands dirty so you're ours" (*ASCG* 114). Gabriel in turn is frustrated by his father's constant attempts to force him into more masculine roles, "You just don't get it. You just don't understand me" (*ASCG* 111). Though the two come to an accord by the end of the novel, the gulf between them is never repaired. Oisín's father is absent both physically and mentally, having favoured the more masculine son who was killed in the service of the IRA. Oisín notes that, "He seldom says anything more than he has to, but has gone more inside himself since Sean was buried" (*Snapshots* 195). It is significant that each father is absent in his own way, emotionally or physically or both, and as such the mother plays a much more predominant role in raising the children. Each mother is depicted as primary, an almost single parent and carer. These women are overbearing, violent and quite masculine. As Mickey notes of his own mother, "She's like two men and a wee lad. You want to see her muscles" (*TGS* 158). This paradigmatic depiction is so prevalent that it prompts Plummer to speculate as to whether there is "some substance to earlier claims by psychiatrists that homosexual sons have 'absent' fathers and 'controlling mothers'?" (Plummer 135). However, this is, as Plummer notes, an unscientific and essentially empty claim. Indeed, if this were true, the amount of gay or queer men in Northern Ireland would surely be truly disproportionate in comparison to the rest of the UK. Rather, the proliferation of absent fathers in Northern Irish fiction is a result, either directly or indirectly (for example, due to alcoholism), of the trauma of the conflict.



The fathers, brothers and male peers in these novels serve to embody and enforce the hyper-masculine, hegemonic masculine ideal in direct counterpoint to the masculine ‘other’ with which the protagonists identify. Bacon argues that this type of depiction presupposes uniformity by “utilising identity categories in ways that essentialise differences” (257). Furthermore, representations of a single “condensed and solidified particular model of gay identity” in juxtaposition to this dominant form of masculinity could be read as essentially reifying and reinforcing the heterosexist, hierarchical binary that requires destabilising (Saxey 52). In a global context this binarised depiction of men may indeed detract from the narrative’s radical potential. However, this is less the case when masculinities are examined in the context of a conservative Northern Ireland “that remains a severely divided and sometimes politically volatile society” (Rea 51). Jeanine Woods draws attention to the radical depiction of transgendered Kitten in the film *Breakfast on Pluto* based on the novel of the same title by Patrick McCabe. Woods describes a particularly poignant scene in which Kitten joins an IRA Parade, where all participants are dressed in black with balaclavas and black sunglasses. Kitten provocatively asks, “If I join up can I have pink sunglasses, please?” which, as Woods notes, serves to undercut “the gravitas of the parade and its masculinist militarism” (32). One may discern equally transgressive implications in Gregory’s *Snapshots*, as Jude recollects seeing Oisín for the first time at his brother’s televised funeral. Although initially depicted as averse to Oisín’s visible otherness, he is equally fascinated: “He wore eyeliner to the funeral. And the age of him. It looked so cool in the middle of all the balaclavas” (*Snapshots* 114). This juxtaposition of masculine alterity with hyper-masculinity can be seen as a politically radical “queering of the discursive matrix in which the conflict is located: a masculinist, rigidly defined conception of national identity” (Woods 32). This illustrates quite clearly how even a singular, stereotypical depiction of gay alternative

masculinity can still be a tool for radical politics. It offers an emancipatory modality of masculinity that can “fracture the ethnosectarian discourse in a radically transformative manner” (Rea 61).

However, there is a potential danger of exclusionary practice in depicting the queer masculine experience with such homogeneity. As Saxey warns, “if this plot and this person continue to dominate the story of same-sex desire, a significant degree of diversity will be lost” (50). Of course, although the majority of the protagonists are presented along similar lines, it does not mean that every queer character in the novels adheres to this construction of masculinity. Others, such as Jude in *Snapshots*, have a much more problematic experience of masculine identity, exacerbated by their burgeoning sexuality. Jude, in many ways, is depicted as the very antithesis of Oisín. Whereas Oisín is outspoken and individual, Jude tries to blend in with a decidedly masculine crowd. Where Oisín is seen as effeminate, Jude is contrastingly depicted as hyper-masculine. Male violence is a central tenet in each of these novels. The violence (when not at the hands of the mother) is almost always at the hands of heteronormative, hyper-masculine characters as aggressors with the more ‘effete’ and effeminate queer masculinities as victims. *Snapshots* is an important exception to that rule. In *Snapshots* Jude, much like his father, has problems with aggression and violence. Jude’s relationship with his father is never explicitly illustrated, however one may infer from the brevity of the few lines dedicated to him that it is decidedly terse. Jude describes his father as a long-term alcoholic, previously a wine drinker, although “Dad only drinks spirits these days” (*Snapshots* 90). Even sober his father is violent, which is made clear when Jude describes his father’s reaction to the referee’s mistaken call at a Gaelic football game, “I mean it was a bad decision. But Dad decked him. He broke three of your man’s teeth and had to be restrained” (*Snapshots* 91). Jude too is

known for having “an evil temper”, once “punching his fist through a wall at school” because he broke his ruler (*Snapshots* 13). There are several examples of Jude’s violent temperament throughout the novel, however it is important to note that these instances neatly parallel and are juxtaposed with more nurturing, ‘feminine’ behaviours. Jude recalls finding and attempting to care for a small injured baby bird. Upon telling his younger cousins and brother about it they denigrate his behaviour in typically masculinist tones “the younger brother said he was Gonna Step On It And Squash It” to which Jude responds that he will “Squash the wee lad first” (*Snapshots* 50). Similarly, in Oisín’s description of his first proper conversation with Jude, he recalls ironically that “the last thing he said was how he’d like to beat the shit out of one of the first-years. One of the loud girly ones. Obviously” (*Snapshots* 13). Demonstrations of aggression and violence are often considered acceptable performances of hegemonic and heteronormative masculinity, especially within the context of Northern Ireland. In McNicholl’s *A Son Called Gabriel*, the protagonist notes how his one violent retaliation to a bully is sufficient to allow him reluctant respect and inclusion into the male social group, “the boys accepted me as one of them, and even Roland, once his bruised ego recovered, tried to befriend me” (*ASCG* 301). Furthermore, this one incident is considered evidence to prove to Gabriel that he cannot be gay, “Gabriel you’re not a poof...Look at the way you beat that chap up in your class because he wrote a pile of stuff about you on the blackboard” (*ASCG* 339). Indeed, the experience even causes Gabriel to reflect upon and consider violence as legitimate in a political context, “I thought about what a few old Knockburn men had said about political violence, how sometimes it was necessary in order to focus an enemy’s mind and how the strategy seemed to work in a school environment too” (*ASCG* 302). Oisín too, when moved to violence against his own mother, asks himself, “And now you cringing bastard, are you a real man?” (*Snapshots* 193).

One may read in this statement an ironic reflection on whether ‘real’ masculinity is performed as violence at the hands of a stronger individual against a weaker one. Oisín posits his violence within an intrinsically Northern Irish context, “I used to believe that Crossmaglen, the killing fields of tabloid trickery, had never infested my brain. But it’s in everything we do, I realised. It’s them and us” (*Snapshots* 194). In this instance Oisín is referring to his implied act of violence against Neil, somehow causing Neil’s car to crash as revenge for his brother, Sean’s, death. Oisín’s vague reference to the binary “them and us” could apply across all the hierarchical binaries in Northern Ireland. However, the more obvious reference is to an overall binary of oppressors and oppressed. Oisín intimates that the violence and conflict of a highly divided and divisive Northern Ireland permeates our very consciousness and construction of identity. The implication here is that even though Oisín has established a more ‘gentle’, ‘effeminate’ construction of masculinity, he can never truly be other, as the violence of the conflict reinforces all binary constructions. Jude too seems to be confined and defined by violent definitions of masculinity, much like his father. That Jude’s violent impulses are triggered by perceived effeminacy is highly significant, illustrating Jude’s internal homophobia. His inner conflict is epitomised by his reaction to his own reflection which he perceives with a disgust that goes beyond his “old and spotty” features (*Snapshots* 70). Furious over his mother’s attitude towards homosexuality – “I was so angry I wanted to tell her all about Oisín” – he looks at his face in the mirror and promptly smashes it (*Snapshots* 77). His revulsion at his own reflection is reiterated later in the novel, when in Mike’s house he notices a mirror but remarks “I couldn’t face it” (*Snapshots* 91). Jude performs overt displays of hyper-masculine aggression; however, these are always prompted by feelings of inadequacy at his own non-compliance, which is in turn

indicative of how inability to reconcile the divide “between ‘self’ and ‘other’ becomes arbitrary, volatile and miscible” (Plummer 210).

Certainly, both Jude and Oisín feel trapped by the dominant hegemonic prescriptions of Northern Irish masculinity, in which violence is as implacable as it is inescapable. Surrounded by masculine idols of the militaristic IRA juxtaposed with the martyred “Jesus and his bleeding heart” (*Snapshots* 71), there is no alternative model of masculinity for these boys to identify with or emulate. However, attention may be drawn to the other, albeit peripheral, characters in the novel in order to consider alternative, potentially radical depictions of masculinity.

One of the most potentially radical depictions of masculinity in the novel is that of Neill, the possibly homosexual IRA sniper. Politically transgressive, this character destabilises the form of masculinity predicated upon the hyper-masculine, heteronormative ‘warrior’ symbol. Gregory’s depiction is both literally and metaphorically queering the masculinist narrative of the Troubles. This depiction references an incident in 1991 in which explosives were confiscated from a gay IRA member, who the media then nicknamed “The Homo Provo” (Dowler 59). Nationalist men at the time repudiated the incident as propaganda, an attack on their masculinity. As Dowler explains, many men felt it “their political duty to have their bodies conform to the accepted ideals of masculinity and heterosexuality for fear that any sign of masculine ‘weakness’ such as homosexuality would be used as a weapon against them” (59). By depicting the masculine Neill as queer, Gregory underlines the hypocrisy inherent in such entrenched homophobic assumptions of normative masculinity.

Mike, Jude’s one-time sexual partner, is also depicted as conforming to hegemonic dictates of masculinity. His character is one of almost iconic masculine conformity: just ‘one of the boys’, ostensibly straight, it is clear that his queerness does not impinge upon his

construction of conventional masculinity. Cronin criticises this depiction of masculinity as detracting from the radical potential of queerness. Speaking of the main character in Lennon's novel *When Love Comes to Town*, he states that "Niall's being gay need have minimal implications for the prevailing constructions of gender and class in his society. The novel asserts how, aside from being gay, Niall conforms to masculine norms" (*He's My Country* 256). However, one might argue that this in itself is potentially transgressive, indicating as it does that one does not have to conform to "the stereotype of effete gay boy" (Saxey 41) in order to be queer. This serves to undermine the homophobic notion of homosexual visibility as predicated upon overt displays of femininity, thus essentialising difference. This is particularly well illustrated in *A Son Called Gabriel*, as Gabriel's mother refers to a man she believes is gay by his non-masculine behaviour, "He was so showy and shrill and all flying hands. He wore three rings on the one hand too. Can you believe it? Three" (*ASCG* 337). His mother believes Gabriel cannot be gay because he does not conform to this stereotype of 'gay' behaviour, "No son. No, you're definitely not that sort" (*ASCG* 337). Although the depiction of multivalent masculinities in *Snapshots* is far from comprehensive, one might argue that it is, nonetheless, making tentative steps towards a plural depiction of queer masculinities, and to some extent counters the "marginalisation of subjects that do not exhibit the stereotypical characteristics associated with the paradigm of visibility" (Xhonneux 99).

One key example of otherness to the hegemonic masculine ideal is found in McNicholl's *A Son Called Gabriel*, in the portrayal of Gabriel's biological father Brendan. Brendan, initially Fr. Brendan, is depicted in direct counterpoint to Gabriel's 'adoptive' father. Describing Gabriel to Brendan he asserts, "He's just like you, Brendan ... Gabriel's better at the books and has no time for my machines" (*ASCG* 265). To this Brendan replies, "It takes all types to run a world,

Harry” (*ASCG* 265). Brendan’s insistence upon stressing the equality of multiple modes of masculinity quickly identifies him as Gabriel’s role model and saviour within the novel, personifying an alternative mode of masculinity with which Gabriel identifies: “He was my yardstick of manly happiness” (*ASCG* 304). Brendan is continually depicted as associated with a masculine other, even on the most superficial of levels. As Gabriel and his mother and aunt discuss ornaments, they remark, “you know how men are about things like that. Men never pass remarks on an ornament, whether it’s quality or not,” to which Brendan immediately interjects to remark upon her new figurines (*ASCG* 260). This depiction could be argued as perhaps being a little heavy handed, but it is nonetheless clear that the author wishes to set Brendan up as an alternative mode of masculinity, and that Brendan himself is consciously presenting himself as such. Furthermore, Gabriel believes his own alternative model of masculinity is legitimised by his similarity to Brendan, and this is frequently corroborated by his Grandmother’s observations of their similarities, “Granny always said I was more like Uncle Brendan, I liked the things he liked, and I didn’t like lorries” (*ASCG* 359). It is strongly suggested that Gabriel too join the priesthood. One must consider the author’s deliberate portrayal of Catholic society’s insistence that the priesthood should be the sole repository of and occupation for masculine otherness. This is illustrated throughout the novel by Gabriel’s family’s consistent wish that he join the priesthood. His mother asserts “Yes, I am praying ever so hard you will get a call someday” (*ASCG* 86). Her further iteration and implication that, “You won’t be interested in girls or let them stand between you and the call if it comes, will you?” suggests that the priesthood is for those “not interested in girls” (*ASCG* 86). In addition, one might assume that given the poor status of Catholic men at that time, particularly in rural Northern Ireland, if one did not conform to the masculine ideal of farmer, there was no other recourse for sensitive or educated men.

However, Brendan's depiction as a viable alternative construction of masculinity is unfortunately somewhat undermined by several problematic issues within the text that detract from the radical potential of his depiction. Most notably, the narrative is designed to strongly imply that Brendan, like Gabriel, is non-heterosexual. His masculine otherness coupled with the secret surrounding his problematic and hasty ordination into the Priesthood compounds this suggestion, yet it is merely a narrative convention distracting the reader from the 'real' secret – that Brendan is in fact Gabriel's biological father, an arguably less radical transgression. That Brendan depicts an alternative masculinity but is heterosexual does not necessarily divest the narrative of its radical potential, however it is somewhat undermined in the novel. Brendan's implied virility not only produces Gabriel, but his later affair with an African woman acts as a catalyst in him leaving the church. In addition, Gabriel's difference from Brendan is made explicit as his adoptive father emphasises their essential masculine difference, "Brendan played with machinery when he was younger. He was always on our neighbour's tractor. I don't think that explains our differences at all" (*ASCG* 359). Thus Brendan, Gabriel's one model of alternative masculinity, is placed forever out of reach, undermined by his essential difference, his heterosexuality.

Though it is evident that some of these authors have made tentative steps towards more pluralist representations of masculinity, overall the depiction of masculinities in the novel is highly binarised. Rather than extrapolating that in reiterating the intragender binary, radical political potential is lost, one may interpret this as a critique of Northern Irish society's "emphatically constrictive" prescription of masculine gender roles (Rea 61). In so doing, these authors "demonstrate how limiting such gender roles can be to heterosexuals" (Saxey 144). As such these novels depict not only the "difficulty of performing masculinity as a queer man"



(Stobie 327) in Northern Ireland, but the difficulty and restrictions in performing masculinity simply as a man.

It is clear that, since the instigation of the peace process, a prolific amount of work has been produced in what was once a vacuum of fiction depicting queer masculinities. The socio-cultural impact of articulating the voice of the other cannot be underestimated. Speaking of his motivation behind writing *The Good Son* in interview, Paul McVeigh remembers how as a boy he felt unrepresented and wondered: “Why is no one telling my story? Why is no one speaking for me?” (Harvey). His protagonist Mickey similarly notes the lack of alternative models of masculinity and laments “The TV is the only place I can see people like me” (*TGS* 87). Jarlath Gregory also remarks in interview with Clare Savage, that even in the late nineties “gay characters were vastly underrepresented in popular culture” and as such “it was important to me to have gay lead characters in my first two books.” Set in their respective time periods, covering the nineteen sixties up to the late nineties, these *bildungsromane* not only address the lack of visibility for marginal and queer masculinities, but also, retrospectively contribute to the establishment of a queer history in Northern Ireland. However, this queer history could be potentially problematic, as it is imperative to reiterate that these novels are written by and exclusively depict working class, Catholic and Nationalist men. It remains incumbent to address the proliferation of queer fiction by authors from a Catholic Nationalist background and the comparative lack from authors of a Unionist, Protestant or other backgrounds.

From the announcement of the Good Friday Agreement, there is distinct statistical evidence that Northern Irish society is becoming more liberal in its attitudes towards homosexuality. Marian Duggan, in her seminal text *Queering Conflict*, analyses the reaction to same sex relationships in Northern Ireland since 1998, noting that “Protestants consistently

answered that two adults of the same sex was always wrong” (27). She delineates statistically that of the Protestant respondents in 1998, 67 percent believed same-sex relationships were “always wrong”, in 2004 that became 56 percent and 58 percent in 2008. Conversely Catholics answered “50 percent, 32 percent and 31 percent respectively” (27). Though noting the statistical disparity Duggan herself does not offer an explanation for the difference, suggesting instead that “it may be beneficial to investigate Catholic perceptions of homosexuality with a view to understanding how identity differences can be integrated better into society” (27). John Nagle goes beyond these statistics however and posits that the difference is due to the “conflation of gay and lesbian rights issues with the equality agenda promoted by the Nationalist community” (11). A discussion as to whether this is a disingenuous political strategy lies outside the remit of this thesis, however one may suggest that there remains a confluent ideology and experience of marginalisation. Cathy Cohen suggests that “At the intersection of oppression and resistance lies the radical potential of queerness to bring together all those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics” (203). Similarly, Sinn Féin’s 2013 policy, for “Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Equality” states that, “(Nationalists) are only too well aware of what it means to be treated as second-class citizens. Our politics are the result of decades of resistance to marginalisation and discrimination” (Nagle 10). Indeed, Seamus Deane refers to this mutually shared experience of marginalisation in his comment on the cover of McNicholl’s novel that it depicts, “the subaltern life, a minority within a minority” (*ASCG*). This sense of affinity between marginalised minorities who identify as other may explain to some extent the proliferation of Catholic Nationalist authors of queer fiction. Ironically, however, the voice of this particular minority may now potentially come to dominate queer discourse in Northern Ireland. This would be of great detriment to Northern Irish literature as in order to have truly radical political

potential, to encapsulate and enunciate the voice of the other, it is imperative that a “proliferation of viable identities, bodies and positions across the ethnosectarian divide is sought” (Rea 61).

This is important to not only articulate but to create alternative expressions and constructions of masculinity, which will have potentially radical implications across the divide of gender, sexuality and nationalism, and indeed identity politics in general. As Rea asserts, this “search for an opening up of identity in post-conflict Northern Irish society is at times a utopian task, seeming at times doomed to failure, but that does not mean it is not a task worth pursuing” (61). Moreover, as Saxey remarks, “discourses of identity help to create what they describe” (5), thus these literary texts contribute in no small way to the social and discursive construction of alternative and plural masculinities. These novels provide a language, experience and opportunity to open a discussion about rigidly defined normative representations of gender in Northern Ireland.

**Chapter Three: Fathering Masculinities: Like Father, Like Son? Transgenerational Trauma and Intergenerational Masculinities in David Park's *Swallowing the Sun* and *The Light of Amsterdam***

When you teach your son, you teach your son's son.

*The Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Kiddushin*

The role of the father as both performer and producer of masculinities is of intrinsic importance to the discourse on masculinity. Masculinity theorists Marsiglio and Pleck emphasise the importance of paternity as an agent to express and deconstruct not only hegemonic masculinity, but also “alternative constructions of masculinities that give meaning to men’s everyday lives in diverse situations” (250). Given the potential for paternity to facilitate this move away from patriarchal, hegemonic masculinity towards more ameliorative expressions of masculinity, an examination of the father-son relationship in the Northern Irish post-conflict novel is critical to this thesis. Examining the depictions of intergenerational masculinity in David Park’s *Swallowing the Sun* and *The Light of Amsterdam* indicates that the trauma passed down transgenerationally from father to son demonstrates the potential for paternity to encourage or alternatively, inhibit, the succeeding generation’s constructions of masculinity.

Floyd and Kimmel contend that “the father-son relationship may be the single most significant male-male relationship in a man’s life-cycle” and Eric Miller notes that in contemporary academic literature the role of the father is largely “portrayed as critical to how the son sees himself as an emerging adult” (194). Given the pertinence of the impact of fatherhood on constructing succeeding generations of masculinities, it is important to not only examine the role of the father as the literal and figurative progenitor of masculinity, but also the depiction of the continually evolving, reciprocally informing, gendered dynamic between father and son. Referred to as the intergenerational approach to masculinity, this strategy “contributes to the

geographies of masculinities literature by researching the relationships between place, age, and gender. It considers the intersections of masculinity with roles within the family” (Richardson 1). Despite the obvious importance of the father-son dynamic to the interrogation of masculinities, Marsiglio and Pleck note that even within mainstream gender discourse “the literature that specifically addresses the relationship between masculinities and fatherhood is sparse” (249). This gap presents a unique opportunity to examine the depiction of intergenerational masculinities in the Northern Irish novel and the potential impact of paternal influence on the next generation’s construction of masculine identity. This is of especial significance within the context of a post-conflict Northern Ireland, in which there is the possibility that more than just models of masculinity may be transmitted through the generations.

While the father-son relationship is of integral importance to (gendered) identity formation, it is nonetheless “often characterised as one replete with much tension and discomfort” (Miller 194). Certainly, this is true for the father-son relationships depicted in the works analysed so far. From O’Reilly’s 2001 *Love and Sleep* to McVeigh’s 2016 *The Good Son*, each novel portrays an inherently dysfunctional father-son dynamic. This is not solely the case for Northern Irish novels but is frequently reflected in Irish literature south of the border. As Ines Praga notes, “the paternal figure is almost always weak or absent or marked by alcohol abuse and/or the propensity of violence/cruelty” (85). Morales-Ladron argues that these depictions “demonstrate that intergenerational (dysfunctional) family patterns, such as violence, emotional deficits or the burden of secrets and lies, which have been interiorised due to faulty upbringings, are doomed to be repeated throughout history” (10). It is this key observation that is fundamental to transgenerational trauma theory, an emergent ideological framework that is increasingly being applied to post-conflict literature.

Much literature depicts a generational conflict between father and son, in which the traditionally patriarchal father, impeded by hegemonic masculine ideals such as emotional constraint, stoicism and financial responsibility, is physically or emotionally absent. For many men this broken relationship with their fathers constitutes an emotional wound that theorists refer to as the father wound, an “internalised, unresolved conflict between father and son” (Diamond 161). This distance, or lack, may have profoundly detrimental effects on identity construction, which, if not addressed, as Castellini notes, results in an “emptiness within men [which] can be conceptualised as a lack of shared energy that can be trusted and relied upon, passing from father to son” (53). This gap, which Miller similarly claims may be “transmitted across generations,” bears a striking similarity to Caruth’s iteration of the abreactive trauma paradigm and transgenerational trauma (197).

Doucet and Rovers define transgenerational trauma as “a secondary form of trauma that may be passed down to subsequent generations through various means of psychological transference” (93). This theory suggests that the temporal gap of the traumatic experiences may be passed on to other generations. As Whitehead explicates, the “effect can leak across generations; that a traumatic event which is experienced by one individual can be passed on so that its effects are replayed in another individual one or more generations later” (14). This chapter considers the depiction of the father wound in two of David Park’s novels as an inherently masculine, transgenerational trauma, with the potential to detrimentally affect succeeding father-son relationships.

For the benefit of disambiguation this chapter adopts the term transgenerational trauma, the prefix ‘trans’, as per the *Collins English Dictionary*, derived from Latin to mean “across, beyond and through,” rather than intergenerational trauma, wherein the prefix is more

connotative of “mutually or reciprocally”. That the nature of this type of trauma is that it is passed down from one generation to the next, rather than the two mutually informing each other, is the basis for the differentiation between transgenerational trauma and intergenerational masculinities.

Prominent masculinity theorists describe fatherhood as a “historically varying social construction,” reflecting the dominant socio-cultural expectations of fatherhood across various generations and cultures (Marsiglio et al. 1175). There is, therefore, a unique opportunity to examine the depiction of intergenerational masculinities in the Northern Irish post-conflict novel and through these works to assess the potential impact of paternal influence on subsequent generations’ construction of masculine identity. This is of especial significance within the context of two of Park’s novels, which depict father-son relationships at two very different periods of post-conflict Northern Ireland. His 2004 novel *Swallowing the Sun* is set at the turn of the millennium. Published nearly ten years later, the events in his 2012 *The Light of Amsterdam* take place in 2005.

*Swallowing the Sun* is preoccupied with the trauma and aftermath of the Troubles and the Good Friday Agreement in which, though the violence of the Troubles may ostensibly be gone, it is most certainly not forgotten. Despite the economic investment and positivity that immediately followed the signing of the Agreement, ethnosectarian divides continue, in some cases with even more fervour than before. Park’s protagonist keenly notes of the newly redeveloped Newtownards Road that “despite the redeveloped homes and the walkways, there is only deterioration and decay” (*STS* 67). Paramilitary organisations not only persist but prosper, financed by organised crime and drug trafficking, furthering societal cynicism towards the peace process. The protagonist, ex-UDA member turned gallery attendant at the Ulster Museum,

Martin Waring, embodies the “disturbed individual” at the heart of the trauma novel “who struggles to discover, confront and give voice to a vague, yet threatening catastrophic past” (Garratt 5). Martin’s struggle to assimilate his traumatic childhood, of emotional and physical abuse at the hands of his father, is further exacerbated and compounded by the loss of his daughter, a bright A star student who dies as a result of taking ecstasy supplied by the UDA. The trauma of losing his daughter serves as a trigger for a dissociative event, the fracturing of his psyche marked by Freudian *Weiderholungszwang*, the compulsion to repeat. In his katabatic descent to avenge his daughter’s death, Martin’s chaotic behaviour increasingly echoes that of his own abusive father’s. The cyclical repetition of the narrative reveals the traumatic relationship between Martin and his father, and the succeeding relationship of Martin to his own son. This provides an opportunity to examine the depiction of not only intergenerational masculinities, but also the potential for transgenerational trauma to affect those masculinities. Examining the very heart of their troubled relationship illuminates how trauma may not only problematise, but crucially inform, the construction of masculine identity.

*The Light of Amsterdam* is decidedly different. The novel depicts several narrative perspectives; however, the narrative largely centres on middle class, apolitical art teacher Alan and his son Jack. Recently divorced father of two Alan is forced by circumstance to take his teenage son, Jack, on a weekend trip to Amsterdam. Despite Alan in many ways embodying a new, more emotional and connected father, his relationship with his son is strained, exacerbated by the recent divorce from his wife. Alan’s difficulties with ‘troubled’ Jack emulate his distant relationship with his own father, a painful father wound that Alan wishes to rectify with his own son.



Park's depiction of Northern Ireland represents a late stage in the peace process, as is reflected by the tone and atmosphere of *The Light of Amsterdam*. Writing in *The Guardian* Ian Sansom gives this novel particular significance by referring to it as "perhaps the first book by a serious Northern Irish novelist – that might be described as a genuinely post-conflict novel" (Sansom). Indeed, *The Light of Amsterdam* reflects Park's deliberate attempt to both geographically and thematically extricate his narrative from the typical Northern Irish Troubles-centric narrative. In interview with Sue Leonard, Park said that he believes that the North needs new narratives. Northern Irish society must "stop endlessly dissecting the events of the past thirty years ... we need to reimagine ourselves." But it seems that this new narrative and new perspective cannot co-exist with old places. As Park explains to Leonard, "I liked that ideal of taking people out of their normal environment and letting them see their lives from a new perspective. That geographical and emotional distance from their origins."

However, just because Park's narrative has been emancipated from the typical context of the Troubles does not mean that the theme of trauma is not equally intrinsic to the text. As Caroline Magennis asserts, "the Troubles have been the predominant narrative catalyst for literature and culture, so other traumas have been relatively hidden from view" ("My Narrative Falters" 47). The effects of trauma remain visible within the text, on a personal, intergenerational and arguably societal level. The protagonist Alan has his own pathological anxieties and insecurities, reflecting those of the author Park himself, who, in his interview with Leonard, has similarly admitted to suffering from anxiety, "Anxiety is a horrible thing, and it's generally unfocused. As a writer, anxiety and general discontent are much more interesting to explore than contentment." Indeed, if Alan is at times characterised to the point of parody, one may question whether, given the numerous biographical parallels between Park and his protagonist, his

depiction of the wryly self-deprecating and overly analytical Alan is an equally self-deprecating portrait and examination of himself.

Park himself is extremely cognisant of specifically masculine, Northern Irish concerns, noting that, “some men feel a disconnect between what’s really inside and what socialisation expects them to feel. Young males are seriously over-represented in suicide rates – the statistics are shocking” (Leonard). While the remit of this thesis is literary rather than sociological, an examination of the impact of transgenerational trauma on intergenerational masculinities is nonetheless timely, critical and necessary to a study of literary representations of post-conflict masculinities.

### **1 Transgenerational Trauma Theory as Literary Praxis**

Transgenerational trauma theory as a literary praxis is based upon an ideological extension of Caruth’s original Neo-Freudian model of trauma, specifically, the abreactive nature of trauma. To recapitulate, this paradigm argues that the overwhelming nature of trauma is unassimilable and so only becomes experienced through abreaction, Freudian belatedness and the compulsion to repeat. Thus, the memory of the traumatic event is itself problematised. As Caruth articulates, “it is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (*Unclaimed Experience* 17). Geoffrey Hartman similarly maintains the necessity of this inherent contradiction to the trauma paradigm, claiming that traumatic memory is “composed of two contradictory elements ... as close to nescience as to knowledge” (537). It is this incomprehensible aporetic memory that Caruth believes to be transmitted transgenerationally through its very abreaction. She explains that “the impossibility of a comprehensible story, however, does not necessarily mean the denial of a transmissible truth” (154). She argues that traumatic memory constitutes “a gap, an abyss” that

can be transmitted through any narrative serving as “the paradoxical foundation of address as the transmission of a gap” (156).

Marianne Hirsch expounds upon this phenomenon, referring to it as postmemory, which she defines as “the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (107). Postmemory, then, is a term for this aporetic memory, not actual memories as we understand them, as personal recollections of lived experience, but paradoxically, the very absence of these lived experiences in a second generation nonetheless similarly affected by the same trauma. This trauma may be narratively transmitted from one generation to the next, as Hirsch explains, as postmemory describes “the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up” (106). Hirsch emphasises that the resultant experiences “were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (107). It is important to distinguish that postmemories are “not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (107).

However, it is this epistemological paradox that divides theorists on the suitability of transgenerational trauma theory as a literary paradigm. Michelle Balaev takes issue with Caruth’s central premise that traumatic experience is at once “repetitious, timeless and unspeakable, yet, it is also a literal, contagious and mummified event” (151). She argues that transgenerational trauma theory “establishes an essentialist concept of identity organised around a notion of the intergenerational sharing of loss and suffering because the actual event is transmitted to descendants of the same racial, ethnic, religious or gender group” (153). Balaev

criticises this essentialist a priori transmission of postmemory, stating that a theoretical extension of this argument would mean that “everyone can experience trauma through vicarious means based on one’s ethnic, racial, gender, sexual, or economic background” (152). Moreover, Balaev argues that this deterministic framework necessarily dictates that the same intensity of trauma is experienced at secondary, tertiary and even further removes beyond the generation initially traumatised, thus forming the basis for transhistorical trauma (152). Balaev echoes la Capra in arguing that this paradigm potentially allows “certain people who did not experience trauma to culturally appropriate particular trauma by other groups in a movement of identity formation that relies on traumatic events for ‘symbolic capital’ in society” (154).

However, it is crucial to note that transgenerational trauma theory is not solely an ideological paradigm. Just as Balaev herself warns against “discursive dependence upon a single psychological theory of trauma” (149) it is imperative to note that contemporary psychology is predicated on modern conceptual models that accept that transgenerational transmission of trauma is non-determinist and behaviourally transmitted (in addition to potentially epigenetically transmitted). Rather than preclude the Caruthian model of trauma, by adapting and including elements of more contemporary clinical models of transgenerational trauma, one may augment and enhance the paradigm as a whole.

Modern psychological models pragmatically examine how traumatically informed and learned maladaptive patterns of behaviour can and are passed down transgenerationally, due to and through a variety of factors and vectors which in turn affect a child’s developmental trajectory. There is a proliferation of models of transgenerational trauma employing a variety of transmissions from the psychodynamic and sociocultural to the biological and epigenetic. While there is no one overarching exemplar which can be applied to literary praxis, this chapter

incorporates elements from these systems, focusing on direct and indirect modes of transmission and the nature and impact of maladaptive parenting behaviour on a child's construction of masculinity.

Similarly, one can view the father wound as an example of behaviourally transmitted trauma that may impact a child's concomitant construction of masculinity. As noted, the father wound is associated with hegemonic proscriptions of masculinity, as Miller iterates, "It appears that strongly adhering to the traditional masculine role of largely focusing on work and remaining emotionally detached is hurting both fathers and sons" (196). This physical and emotional detachment has a negative impact on a child and may "create developmental deficits for their children to overcome" (Palkovitz 5).

However, reflecting current psychological research into transgenerational trauma, this father wound "does not necessarily have to be a driving force of negativity in a man's life" (Miller 203). Rather, as Miller suggests, it can be a "positive motivational influence on the lives of men and those around them" (203). Indeed, current psychological research into transgenerational trauma theory and resilience also potentiates the agency and autonomy of the individual, and counters some of le Capra's and Balaev's accusations of determinism. Recent literature on posttraumatic growth has suggested that "people exposed to traumatic events report positive changes in their self-perceptions, their perceptions of others, and in the objective and meaning in their lives" (Dekel and Goldblatt 287). Doucet and Rovers similarly summarise the current research, postulating that resilience is a function of "complex behavioural tendencies and personality traits" that facilitate the ability to "cognitively restructure negative experiences" (99). This empowers the individual, enabling the repetitious cycles of trauma to be broken, which in

turn potentiates a plurality of possibilities for the trauma novel rather than the one “homogenous interpretation” that Balaev warns against (149).

## **2.i. Narrative Structures in *Swallowing the Sun***

*Swallowing the Sun* depicts Northern Irish society in the years immediately following the Good Friday Agreement. This was a transitional time in the peace process, when the population was still reeling from the sectarian legacy of the Troubles which, although less prominent, remained present. As the narrator notes as protagonist Martin Waring revisits his childhood home on the Newtownards Road, “He’s never seen so many flags, not even in the heart of the Troubles. They’re on every pole and post, turf-markers in the new wars” (*STS* 67). This is a society that, while still traumatised by recent events, treats the nascent peace process with a great deal of distrust. Park makes reference to the still recent event of the Omagh bombing, which occurred on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1998, scant months after the Good Friday Agreement. It was the single most devastating attack in the history of the Troubles, killing twenty-nine and injuring two hundred and twenty others, yet no one was held accountable. Martin vents frustration to the police, saying, “You couldn’t pin Omagh on anyone – twenty nine people and two unborn babies – so what’s one seventeen year old girl” (*STS* 173). Furthermore, as fallout from the Agreement a prison release scheme, while necessary for the peace process to continue, meant that hundreds of paramilitaries were released back onto the streets of Northern Ireland, provoking an ambivalent reaction amongst communities. Park portrays this through Officer Roberts’ succinct yet poignant rejoinder to Martin that he too lost someone; a friend and colleague was killed in the Troubles and the murderer responsible was released as part of this scheme. Roberts’ situation encapsulates the cruelty of a reality in which a murderer, instead of being punished, is being groomed for

political office, “I see him from time to time – he always makes sure to smile and wave, asks me how I’m doing. You know how that feels Martin?” (*STS* 172).

Given the time period in which Park was writing, it is no surprise that *Swallowing the Sun* is not only a novel about trauma, but a trauma novel. Whether intentionally or intuitively on Park’s part, *Swallowing the Sun* conforms to every convention of trauma fiction as set out by Anne Whitehead’s seminal text, *Trauma Fiction*, published in the same year as Park’s novel. While Park is obviously intimately concerned with trauma within the Northern Irish post-conflict context, it is clear that interest in trauma and literary trauma theory was synonymously garnering increasingly significant academic attention on a global scale. From the themes that predominate throughout, of trauma, memory, silence, secrecy and shame, through to the application of the stylistic devices of “intertextuality, repetition and a fragmented or dispersed narrative voice” (Whitehead 84) that permeate the structure of the novel as a whole, *Swallowing the Sun* serves as an archetypal exemplar of the genre. Indeed, Park employs a complex indirect narrative strategy in the novel, via use of an omniscient third person extradiegetic narrator, through which the intradiegetic perspectives are related.

Thematically and stylistically *Swallowing the Sun* follows the convention of the typical trauma novel. One of the more common conceits in trauma fiction is the reappropriation and reconceptualisation of the gothic ghost story. As Anne White explicates, “The ghost represents an appropriate embodiment of the disjunction of temporality, the surfacing of the past on the present” (6). As such the protagonist of the trauma novel is often haunted both literally and figuratively by the past. While Park’s novel does not portray the supernatural, the ghost of Martin’s past is personified by his mother, a silent and complicit witness to his childhood abuse. She is an apparition frequently appearing in Martin’s peripheral vision, initially as a silent

witness looking onto the traumatic abuse of his childhood in the image of “his mother’s face hanging ghostly behind the glass” (*STS* 5). This is repeated later when in the museum, a place dominated by the past, he sees “his mother’s face flitting like a ghost behind the glass” (*STS* 13). Martin’s mother is symbolic of a childhood Martin would like to bury but of which he is constantly reminded. It is a somewhat ironic portrayal, as it becomes clear that his mother now suffers from dementia and is locked in the past herself, believing her sons to still be children and unaware of her current surroundings.

Another important recurrent theme in trauma fiction is the problematisation of memory and remembering, a theme that predominates in *Swallowing the Sun*. This is evident not only in the obviously symbolic Ulster Museum in which Martin works, but also in the repeated references to photographs, particularly those of his daughter Rachel after her passing. Rachel’s mother ruminates on the limitations of memory as she endeavors to “keep Rachel alive in her head, the images are shrouded and out of focus like some photograph that hasn’t fully been developed” (*STS* 115). Later, noting that there is “no photograph that contains the sound of her voice” (*STS* 197), Martin is also incensed as he “thinks of Rachel’s photograph yellowing in a discarded pile of newspapers” that she, like her photograph will fade and be forgotten (*STS* 189). Park explores the idea that memory, like the photographs, fades with time and one can only remember so much. Memories, like photos, may be inconstant and even corrupted, as he considers that the once happy photo of Rachel at her prize-winning ceremony holding the cup is now the “most effective” photograph used on the news to refer to her death by drugs and to solicit information (*STS* 120).

Park’s novels tend to conform to the narrative conventions of the realist novel. Like *The Light of Amsterdam*, they follow a linear chronological trajectory, are consistently written in the



present tense, clearly delineate changes in time and narrative perspective and are organised into clear, distinct entitled chapters. *Swallowing the Sun*, however, is the sole exception as it both dispenses with and thus, problematises such formal conventions in its refusal to adhere to strict chronological temporality. This is another characteristic of trauma fiction, which demands stylistic innovation in order for the narrative to reflect the traumatological symptomology and what Michael Rothberg refers to as “traumatic realism” (12). While the narrative of *Swallowing the Sun* follows an overarching chronological trajectory, narrative progression and chronotope is consistently undermined by the repeated intrusion of the past onto the present via flashbacks, nightmares and unwanted memories so that, as is typical of trauma fiction “temporality and chronology collapse” (Whitehead 3). This effect is enhanced by the novel’s lack of chapter titles; the reader infers chapter endings by section breaks and textual aporia.

As Garratt notes, “in the trauma novel, both subject and method become central” (5). Indeed, most of the narrative devices Park employs in this novel are so inextricably interwoven into the text that to extricate them as separate from the narrative would be to unravel the narrative itself. Park’s novel goes beyond the previous examples of trauma fiction analysed in that the narrative structure itself conforms not only to the conventions of the trauma novel but synchronously to the traumatological paradigm of “trauma-defense-latency-outbreak of the neurosis-partial return of the repressed material” (Freud 23:80). The very narrative of *Swallowing the Sun* could be argued as neatly paralleling Caruth’s paradigm of “trauma-defense-latency-outbreak of the neurosis-partial return of the repressed material” (Freud 23:80). The initial section depicts the trauma and the maladaptive coping mechanisms with which the two boys try to cope with the trauma. Latency is suggested by the succeeding leap forward in chronotemporality with the depiction of Martin’s various neuroses that only intensify as the

narrative continues. His daughter's death clearly represents the trigger and return of the repressed material, a return to the unassimilated trauma of the past.

To gain insight into the interrelated nature of Park's narrative structure and the traumatological paradigm it is necessary to refer back to the Freudian notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, or 'afterwardsness', as the premise that underpins the Caruthian paradigm of trauma. This is the assumption that a traumatic experience is so profoundly disturbing that it cannot be fully experienced or assimilated into one's consciousness at the time of the event. It is only through the Freudian *Weiderholungszwang*, the unconscious compulsion to repeat, that the event can be known at all. Park structurally parallels this paradigm by prefacing the novel, essentially concerned with adult Martin and his family, with the initial traumatising event of his childhood. Discordantly existent, the event is depicted as not only chronotopically disparate from the main narrative. Without introduction to the characters or circumstances, Park immediately plunges the reader into the visceral, traumatic experience of Martin's physical and emotional abuse that precedes and frames the narrative. Placed in an unfamiliar situation without the control or context normally afforded, the powerless reader vicariously experiences a secondary trauma that parallels the protagonist's own. Furthermore, by depicting it outside of Martin's memory, not within his narrative stream of consciousness, but separate and distinct, it exists as a splinter of memory, discontinuous from the narrative as a whole. This structurally reinforces the idea that a traumatic event exists outside the normal cognitive process and is unassimilable. As Garratt suggests, "it is a non-sequential experience, one that occurs literally out of its own time" (12). While the reader is privy to the event, it exists outside of both Martin's consciousness and his narrative, only referenced indirectly through repetition in the novel.

Caruth asserts that while an inarticulate trauma lays dormant and inaccessible in the unconscious, it nonetheless continues to disrupt temporality and consciousness via its inherently abreactive nature. The act of repetition, *Weiderholungszwang*, is central not only to the pathological paradigm of trauma, but, by extension, is a key literary device of the trauma novel. Repetition, as Whitehead explains “can act at the levels of language, imagery or plot” (84). Park utilises repetition on every level of the narrative to reinforce the exigent nature of the traumatic event and therein the propensity for trauma to be transmitted and perpetuated transgenerationally. To elucidate how Park does this it is necessary to examine separate examples of narrative repetition in the text. As discussed, the initial traumatising event of Martin’s life both exists and is represented as lying outside of his consciousness and is only referred to through repetition. At traumatic junctures in the novel, key phrases of his father’s abuse of him are interposed into the narrative and thus, onto Martin’s mind, the first example of this occurring as Martin is forced to identify his daughter’s body in the morgue. The current traumatic event is so overwhelming that it becomes essentially overwritten by a return to the original traumatic event, a time he was equally powerless over the trauma that befell him. Originally Martin’s father calls his children “little cunts” and “bastards” for allowing the neighbours’ children to steal their bicycle. As he pulls the sheet back to identify his daughter, “the only voice he hears now is telling him that he’s a little bastard, a useless little cunt for letting them take what’s his” (*STS* 97). These words are notably repeated at two more crucial junctures in the novel, when the original traumatic violence and abuse is about to be repeated. These occur during Martin’s enactment of hypermasculine violence on his son’s bully and tormentor, and at the height of Martin’s vengeance when, as he holds a gun to the head of the man responsible for supplying the drugs that killed his daughter. This repetition, while evidenced both linguistically

and imagistically as is characteristic of the trauma novel, “also occurs on a literal level as characters repeat certain actions from the past or mimic the behavior of another generation” (Garratt 6). This literary technique mimics Freudian *Nachträglichkeit* and reinforces the abreactive nature of the traumatic paradigm. As Caruth articulates, “the experience of trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will” (*Unclaimed Experience* 2).

This serves as the basis for transgenerational trauma, the “secondary form of trauma that may be passed down to subsequent generations through various means of psychological transference” (Doucet and Rovers 93). While this theory has been largely critically accepted within the discipline of psychology it is inherently problematic when applied to a literary paradigm with many prominent theorists serving as detractors. Michelle Balaev argues against the epistemological paradox at the center of the critical paradigm, asserting that the traumatic experience may exist as “a fixed and timeless photographic negative stored in an unlocatable place in the brain, but it maintains the ability... to be transferred to non-traumatized individuals and groups” (*Trends* 151). It is her view that the traumatic event, at once not experienced or accessible to the primary victim, this aporia of memory, may be passed down a priori to subsequent generations. This assumption forms the basis for Marianne Hirsch’s theory of postmemory, and informs contemporary paradigms of transgenerational and transhistorical trauma theory. However, Balaev refutes these theories arguing that it “establishes an essentialist concept of identity organised around the notion of the intergenerational sharing of loss and suffering because the actual event is transmitted to descendants” (153). La Capra criticises this notion as an ontological fallacy which Balaev warns “leads to the view that both victim and perpetrator maintain the same relationship to a traumatic experience and exhibit the same

responses” (153). This chapter exposes that while this novel structurally parallels and reinforces the Freudian paradigm of trauma, by also giving his characters agency and autonomy Park equally interrogates and subverts the essentialist and deterministic assumption to reflect a much deeper, more complex paradigm that parallels current psychological theory.

## **2. ii. *The Light of Amsterdam***

Published nearly ten years later than *Swallowing the Sun*, *The Light of Amsterdam* marks a return to Park’s traditional realist format. It features a more conventional and less complex use of narrative structure, enumerated chapters, linear narrative trajectory and chronotopic uniformity. By 2012, Northern Ireland had seen steady economic investment and a continuation (for the most part) of peace in the province and as such society was more forward looking and less cynical. Ian Sansom in a review of the novel remarks that “it is an extraordinary time for writers in Northern Ireland, as new horizons open up, and different expectations and responsibilities make themselves apparent” (Sansom). Having completed *The Truth Commissioner* four years previously, Park explains in interview with Tammy Moore that “When I finished *The Truth Commissioner* I knew I would never write anything on that subject again... Any contribution I had to make as a writer, I had made” (Moore). Park’s next novel would mark a distinct departure from what had gone before. He remarks in interview with Sue Leonard that the inspiration behind *The Light of Amsterdam* came from his wife, “My wife told me I should lighten up,’ he says with a rare laugh. ‘She was saying I should write a book about love” (Leonard). This novel reads as an exposition of the sacrifice involved in parental love. As Park iterates in the same interview, “love is the price to be paid for bringing a child into the world” (Leonard). Despite being set in 2005, only a handful of years after the setting of *Swallowing the Sun*, given that the novel was written nearly ten years later and was informed by a more positive, peaceful Northern

Irish society, it is fair to say that in its light and often comic tone *The Light of Amsterdam* is as different from *Swallowing the Sun* as it could possibly be. However, though this is not a trauma novel that is not to say it is not a novel about trauma, as within the depiction of intergenerational masculine relationships one may discern similar themes of trauma, memory and problematic fatherhood.

The novel features three sets of protagonists visiting Amsterdam on a city break over a weekend. Single mother Karen is accompanying her daughter Shannon to Amsterdam for her hen party, Marion and Richard are a couple taking a weekend away, while for the most part the narrative centres around Alan and his son Jack, on a last-minute weekend away while Alan's ex-wife is in Spain. It is incumbent to note that each of these relationships is parental in nature, and each enables an exploration of themes of fatherhood. Marion and Richard are having a weekend away to spend time together. Their brief story arc is based on a tragicomic misunderstanding between the two. Marion has for her part noticed Richard's increasing detachment from her and believes that hiring a prostitute for him will rekindle his desire for her. Richard, however, as he later reveals, has become distant because their adult daughter has revealed she is gay and wishes to bring her new partner home to visit. Concerned as to his wife's reaction, the impromptu holiday was motivated by a desire to spend time with his wife to discuss the matter. As Caroline Magennis asserts, "For Marion, then, the trauma that she had prepared for was false and the Irish coming-out story, once so significant and painful is a relief" ("My Narrative Falts" 46). This plot line arguably reflects contemporary changes, as sexuality is more fluid and discussion about sexuality more open intergenerationally. Moreover, that Park places the father as the parent in the privileged position of trust with his daughter's secret highlights positive masculine fatherhood roles. For single mother Karen, however, fatherhood is a troubling and traumatic concept.

When she became pregnant with daughter Shannon at a young age, Shannon's father left the two of them with nothing but a note stating that "he wasn't ready to be a father" (*TLOA* 147).

Unbeknownst to Karen, Shannon and her father have been recently reconciled, her father having promised a sum of twenty thousand pounds for his daughter's wedding. Karen treats this revelation as a betrayal, "They had both cheated on her, taken her for a fool for their own selfish purposes" (*TLOA* 162). Shannon's insistence on her father's presence at the wedding, prompted by the financial remuneration and the desire, in Karen's mind, "to make her marriage measure up to everyone else's," makes Karen question how she has raised her daughter (*TLOA* 146).

Shannon has become someone very different in her eyes, "changed and not in ways she would have chosen" (*TLOA* 296). Despite this they reconcile, Karen realising that no matter who her daughter has become, she is her mother and must accept her as she is. The theme of the unequivocal yet unrequited love a parent has for their children and the child's maturation into a separate, autonomous individual at odds with their parents and who they might want them to be is also central to the relationship at the heart of the novel, that of Alan and Jack.

Like *Swallowing the Sun* before it, *The Light of Amsterdam* also explores problematic expressions of masculinity. Both novels begin with scenes involving sports and masculinity. However, where *Swallowing the Sun* opens with a hypermasculine scene of violence contextualised as boxing, *The Light of Amsterdam* opens with protagonist Alan attending masculine icon George Best's funeral. This is a symbolic scenario, as Ian Sansom remarks, depicting "Belfast saying goodbye to a favourite son and hello to a new era" (*The Guardian*). George Best is a masculine icon who reflects a more inclusive Northern Irish society. As a footballer for both Northern Ireland (the national team had a previous association with Unionism) and Manchester United (a team popular amongst Nationalists, its supporters club

situated in the heart of nationalist West Belfast), Best was admired by both communities. It is clear that Park also has a reverence for the footballer, describing him in interview as having had “fabulous balance; brave; and the way he took the ball so close to the opponent, inviting the lunge and as soon as they lunged, they just lunged into space, and he was gone” (Sansom). This sense of an almost mythic masculinity is reiterated by protagonist Alan, who similarly recounts Best’s masculine prowess at football and “the fear of the eyes of those who had to mark him as foot on the ball he struck his matador pose, signalling them forward to their public humiliation” (*TLOA* 2). This is far from the only example of parallels between author and protagonist, whose personality, background and beliefs mirror the author’s own. While this text is replete with positive, competitive masculine imagery, the “collective howl and roar of a predatory, almost exclusively male crowd” (*TLOA* 2), it is pertinent to note that there is no mention of Best’s much publicised alcoholism, which dogged his personal life, particularly his relationship with his son. Alan does note later Best’s son Calum in the funeral cortege and considers, “George’s son confronted with all that outpouring of love for his father. How did that make him feel?” (*TLOA* 7). If Best is Belfast’s son, one may speculate that his relationship with Northern Ireland was as problematic as his relationship with his own son Calum. Indeed, Park picks up on the idea of Northern Ireland fathering problematic, hegemonic masculinities later in the novel, as Gordon questions “why in this country we all always produce stars who are completely screwed up, out of their tree on booze or just barking mad ... There’s George, there’s Alex Higgins ... do you remember the time he told Dennis Taylor he’d get him a head job? And Van Morrison! A genius ... but the ultimate grumpy old man” (*TLOA* 21). One may make the inference that indeed if Northern Ireland is father to all of these men, then it is an equally problematic relationship.



Northern Ireland serves as an emotionally distant and violent father, festering a metaphorical father wound that has the potential to impact masculinities for continuing generations.

### **3.i Transgenerational Trauma and The Father Wound: Martin and *Swallowing the Sun***

Before examining and comparing Park's depiction of fatherhood in the two novels, it is imperative to contextualise the background of the key protagonists in each work. In *Swallowing the Sun* Martin Waring is a working-class man from a working class, unionist and Protestant background. He, like his father, encapsulates the traditional patriarchal role of father, identifying predominantly with the male construct of breadwinner as the patriarchal imperative in caring for his family. In many ways he is the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. This section examines how Park depicts Martin's construction of masculinity as informed by his interrelationships with his father, trauma and Northern Irish society at the turn of the millennium.

As Pettit and Pettit iterate, "If you've suffered abuse, neglect, or absence, then your father wound is a deep and painful one' (7). On every occasion when Park depicts Martin's relationship with his father, it is ensconced in and contextualised by trauma. By utilising the narrative devices and framework of the trauma novel, Park indicates the mutual inherence of fatherhood, masculinity and trauma. His utilisation of the third person extradiegetic narrator as a tool for trauma fiction is particularly powerful here, at once providing disembodied yet intimate omniscient insight into Martin's unconscious while simultaneously problematising the narrative perspective by interweaving multiple points of view seamlessly within the text. Park's depiction of the abuse Martin suffers at the hands of his father is often deliberately confusing, with no explicit punctuation to signify who is speaking or indeed that anyone is directly, "And the two of them aren't worth a piss in the wind ... It's dresses they ought to be wearing...Bloody nancy boys the pair of them" (*STS* 1). Again, by utilising the dispersed narrative voice, by not

differentiating between the extradiegetic narrator and Martin's father, the two voices become conflated. Thus, Martin's father's emotional abuse of his son becomes imbued with the authority of the omniscient narrator, making the abuser's opinion take on the appearance of fact, as it must seem to the child victim. This dialogistic strategy distances the reader from the protagonist as well as reflects the protagonist's fractured psyche. As Laurie Vickroy states, the "complexities of traumatic memory and a subject's difficult relation to the past are suggested by the use of multiple voices and positioning within characters and narrators as well as between them" (27). This also, as Hartman remarks, reflects the imperative within the trauma novel to problematise referentiality, in this case subjectivity, or as Whitehead puts it, to question "whether the traumatised can still say 'I' in a way that still has meaning" (84).

Very little is known about Martin's father. He is never referred to by name and is characterised only indirectly, through the narrator's relation of Martin's increasingly disjointed, traumatic recollections, which serve to highlight the chasm of disconnect between father and son. By employing these narrative strategies Park depicts Martin's father as an unnamed and unknowable omnipresence haunting Martin's traumatised mind. Martin's abuse at the hands of his father involves a systematic process of emasculation, evidence of which can be seen at the very outset of the novel, in the self-contained prologue depicting the causative traumatic experience.

Martin's father, and indeed the physical and emotional abuse he inflicts, is framed literally and metaphorically within a perversion of the masculine sport of boxing. His father is portrayed through boxing imagery, his head "bobs and angles" as he proceeds to stalk his two sons "round the tight square of the yard ... the tight square of the ring" (*STS* 1). He instructs his sons to "take your stance like men" as he hunches "himself into a tight bristle, his raised fists

masking his face so that only his eyes scream out over the top of his fingers” (*STS* 3). What appears to be a lesson in boxing and masculinity, however, is patently an empty justification of physical and mental abuse, in which his father systematically attacks his two young sons, punching “each of them on the side of the head” (*STS* 2). Park clearly describes the power dichotomy of the grown adult in total control and the disparity in the two young vulnerable children as, “They stand in front of him, his mirror image and he can smell his father’s sweat and the sweet scent of their own piss and fear as he comes closer” (*STS* 3). This position is reinforced as he forces the boys to remove their shirts, and “their imaginations fuel their fear – they’ve never been here before” (*STS* 2). By forcing them to strip off their clothes, ostensibly to more fully emulate boxers, what their father is doing is reinforcing his power over the boys as they are left physically and emotionally stripped and at his mercy. He then proceeds to attack his children and their sexuality and masculinity, “It’s fucking dresses they ought to be wearing. Its handbags they should be carrying. Bloody nancy boys the pair of them” (*STS* 1). Knocking one child backwards with the force of his fists he admonishes him to “stop fuckin’ snivellin” (*STS* 4). Their father then suggests the abuse is due to their lack of masculinity, their inability to defend themselves, “Are you just going to stand there and let someone paste you” (*STS* 3). The emasculating nature of this violent abuse coincides with research by Messerschmitt whose findings suggest that acts of violence are often caused by or are connected with what he terms “masculinity challenges” that result in masculine degradation (Messerschmitt 286).

Abruptly their father’s attitude changes. Holding his children close to him he explains that “The world’s full of people like the Thompsons and they’ll walk all over you if you don’t know how to defend yourselves. It’s for your own good” (*STS* 4). Justifying the abuse to his children he then, “skims the back of their heads lightly with the back of his hand in a gesture of

playfulness. Of affection” (*STS* 4). By so doing he is conflating, both in his mind and in the minds of his children, aggression with affection, violence and reward (*STS* 4). His father then sets them against each other. Given the disparity in age and physicality between the two boys he is essentially forcing Martin to enact the same abuse on his younger brother. His father warns Martin that he had better not miss, “Show him how, Martin, show him how or I’ll do the showing. Make him step back. Make his eyes water” (*STS* 4). The scene culminates as his father screams, “Show him, Martin! Show him, son!’ and in his peripheral vision Martin sees his mother’s face hanging ghostly behind the glass” (*STS* 5).

This section of the novel is integral both thematically and structurally, it also clearly depicts the issues that will undermine Martin’s construction of masculinity. Not only does his father condition him to violence through violence, but the older boy is punished for what his father perceives to be his brother’s weakness. As Martin attempts to cover for his brother – “It was my fault, Da. I’m the oldest I should have stopped him” – his father openly slaps Martin, “the open handed slap shudders his whole body, flaming his cheek and all the parts of him that can’t be seen” (*STS* 2). His father retorts, “Of course it was your fault Martin – I don’t expect better from him anymore” compounding in Martin’s mind that he is being punished for his brother’s lack of masculinity (*STS* 2). Indeed, his brother’s reliance upon him for protection sparks Martin’s ambivalent feelings towards his younger brother, born out of the abuse experienced at home but continued into adulthood. At once feeling responsible for protecting his brother but also resentful, “He wants to push him away it’s not fair of him. What can he do? What can he ever do but let his father tire himself out on him, take the first flush of anger” (*STS* 2). The two brothers become estranged. Rob’s construction of masculinity is too effeminate for

Martin and his paramilitary compatriots, as one former paramilitary friend of Martin's, Jaunty, remarks, "Rob – what a fuckin' weight to carry all your life" (*STS* 109).

Kia-Keating et al. note in their 2005 study that for male victims of domestic abuse, having been the brunt of aggression and powerless as victims, "one trajectory taken by a minority but significant number of abused men is to react by becoming hypermasculine; in other words, hyperaggressive, overcontrolled, unemotional, action oriented, and abusive to others" (Kia-Keating et al. 169). While this may not be the case for every child, considering that the physical abuse came at the hands of a male who was essentially conditioning his sons to be hypermasculine, one might reasonably assume this is a contributing factor behind Martin's later involvement in paramilitary violence. At first a member of a Tartan Gang (an unofficial branch of the UDA for teenagers and young people), he recalls attacking a young Catholic boy who had mistakenly ventured into their territory, "in his head he hears the screams and whimpers of the boy, the clack and clog dance of their boots on the ridged concrete ... their legs still swinging at a head and body that break and burst like a piece of rotten fruit" (*STS* 106). This visceral description is also justified as a dominant display of hegemonic masculinity, as each competed with the other to be "the warrior that inflicted the most damage" (*STS* 106). Martin "invites his kid brother to be as big a man as they are and leave his print," however his brother is too frightened and the gang runs off down the street. Martin's embodiment of violent masculinity, arguably learned from and conditioned by his father, reinforces the hegemonic masculinity demanded by involvement in the Troubles.

While Martin could well have continued along this path, as have many from his background and community in the novel, meeting his future wife Angela and inspired by the potential to negotiate new masculine roles, those of husband and father, prompts him to make a

resolute break with the past. He finally and irrevocably cuts ties with his father, whose constant harassment of abusive phone calls in the middle of the night and frightening Martin's wife has dogged his new marriage. Martin uses his old connections to send an armed paramilitary to his father's house to threaten his father, warning him "to stay clear of his son and his new wife" (*STS* 44). He feels vindicated that by cutting all ties with his family he has ensured the safety of his children. His father "never got his hands on them, never so much as saw his grandchildren before he died" (*STS* 70). Leaving the Newtownards Road, Martin also quits his previous paramilitary associations, instead becoming a respected employee of the Ulster Museum, a position with cultural connotations that affords him some cachet. Both he and his wife work hard to buy their own house in a more affluent and less sectarian neighbourhood. Martin "is glad that he made it out, gave his own kids a chance at something better" (*STS* 67). It is clear that Martin, for his wife, his children and for himself, is desperately trying to differentiate from his own father and background and to renegotiate a masculinity no longer informed by the negative influences in his life.

At first it seems Martin has been successful in establishing a completely different life for himself and his family, as the initial section depicting trauma and violence is immediately followed by a scene of joy and pride. The main narrative begins with Martin and his wife watching their daughter accept an award for academic excellence. Awarded ten A stars at GSCE, Rachel is being groomed for a place at either Cambridge or Oxford. However, it becomes clear that Martin's incredible pride in his daughter is also a cause of estrangement between them. He deifies his daughter, and thinks she should be centre stage, "wearing the stars in her hair like a garland, a wreath of ten diamonds" (*STS* 8). Yet he also feels utterly estranged from and strange to her. Given his background and lack of educational qualifications he feels ashamed and

wonders “if he can find no connection with these stars, what connects him to his daughter? What makes him her father?” He believes it nothing other than “some hereditary misprint, a freak of genetics that could have produced such a child” (*STS* 9). The reader learns through the narrator that Rachel laments the emotional distance between herself and her father, and as he hovers outside her room while she studies she wonders, “Why does he never come in and sit on the bed and talk to her? Does he think that what she does is so important that she mustn’t be disturbed?” (*STS* 55). Instead she wishes that her father would come and give her some advice, “Tell her the things he knows” (*STS* 55).

Martin’s devotion to his daughter has distanced him from having a relationship with his son, who feels neglected in comparison to the amount of attention that his sister receives. This is compounded by Martin’s lack of ability to relate to his son, who emulates his brother Rob more than his father, from whom he feels completely alien. As his wife exhorts him to spend more time with his son he replies, “You know I’ve tried, but he’s not interested in sport or anything else I can see except stickin’ his head in that computer. If Rachel didn’t need it I’d get rid of it” (*STS* 55). Martin is similarly detached from his wife, who yearns for an emotional intimacy and honesty from him that his traumatic childhood precludes. Their lack of emotional and physical intimacy have contributed to Martin’s recent, albeit single, infidelity in twenty years. Martin’s inability to communicate is directly informed by the trauma of his childhood, a trauma he feels is a shameful and unutterable secret. His reluctance to communicate is repeatedly symbolised by his dislike of mobile phones, his disgust at “speaking in public what should be kept private” (*STS* 67).

While far from an ideal husband or father, it is clear that despite his traumatisation Martin has endeavoured to rewrite his narrative, to differentiate himself from his father and the violent

masculinities that marred his childhood. That by his own agency he is able to have autonomy over his own life and to break the cycle of abuse deviates from the deterministic aspect of the traumatological paradigm. However, the powerlessness he feels over his daughter's death triggers a fracture in his psyche as, compelled by *Weiderholungszwang* and *Nachträglichkeit*, he increasingly emulates his father's violent behaviour.

Informed by the police that their daughter has died due to an overdose of ecstasy, neither Martin nor his wife can accept that their idolised daughter could possibly have succumbed to such a fate. While Angela is later able to accept her daughter's fallibility despite being contrary to her idealistic view of her, Martin is unequipped to deal with this. Forced to identify the body and face the truth, Martin is unable to assimilate the event and is plunged back into his childhood, a time he was equally powerless over the trauma that befell him. Unconsciously feeling as responsible for the loss of his daughter as he felt for the loss of his brother's bicycle, he sees his father "circling him, moving constantly, weaving his words and movement ... Laughing because he was stupid enough to think he'd escaped" (*STS* 98). Martin is trapped by the deterministic notion that trauma defines his life, that agency is only an illusion and he cannot escape, "he's been a fool to think that a job and a house of their own on a different road would be enough to carry them beyond the reach of what's out there" (*STS* 190). He views the loss of his daughter as punishment for trying to break from the past and establish a new, better future. It is "the price he paid for getting above himself, for turning his back on where he came from" (*STS* 106).

As Martin and Angela work with the police, entreating the community for information as to who supplied the drugs, Martin becomes increasingly belligerent and antagonistic as he realises the police have little expectation of making an arrest. As he watches a teenage boy



graffiti chairs in the police station, “suddenly he feels himself swept along on the rip tide of his anger” and threatens to “stick that fuckin pen down your throat” (*STS* 138). Infuriated by the lack of results the police are getting; Martin’s behaviour becomes increasingly erratic as he is determined to find the drug dealer he views as responsible for his daughter’s death. He stalks and interrogates the other teenage girls who bought and took drugs with Rachel and is barely able to keep his violent tendencies in check. When questioning one girl, “He wants to stretch out his hand, grab her by the throat, let her know what real fear feels like” (*STS* 178).

Overcome with shame when he realises he has been neglecting his son, Martin decides to make an impromptu visit to the boy’s school to take him home. At first he sees his son surrounded by boys and is relieved to know he has friends and that his behaviour is typically masculine, “for a second he imagines they’re playing conkers. A boy’s game” (*STS* 185). However, he soon realises that his son is being physically attacked by a group of bullies. Unable to control his anger, he lashes out at the boys, throwing one against the side of a van, “his back and then his head thudding hollowly against its side panel” (*STS* 185). What follows echoes, beat for beat, a repetition of the original traumatic experience at the start of the novel. This time, however, Martin repeats the behaviour of his father. He attacks the main culprit, Chapman, and “slaps him hard on the cheek, making his head almost jerk off his shoulders” (*STS* 186), just as his father had slapped Martin, when “the open handed slap shudders his whole body” (*STS* 2). While Chapman continues to bait Martin, Tom begs his father to stop, “and in his son’s voice he can hear all his fear and he understands everything” (*STS* 186). Martin beats Chapman to the ground, then echoes his own father’s abusive behaviour in forcing him to punch his brother. He orders his son to kick the already prone Chapman, “Kick him, kick the shit! To help him remember. Do it! Do it! He’s shouting over and over at him. Do it! Do it!” (*STS* 188). Echoing

his father's actions and language, "He pummels his son in the soft folds of his back. 'You can't just stand there and let someone like this little piece of shit piss on you. Show the little cunt you're not going to take it'" (*STS* 188). This involves his son in the abuse, the same way his father had originally involved Martin (*STS* 188). As Tom reluctantly "kicks him with the slow shuffle of the foot" the scene culminates in an exact repetition of the initial trauma as Martin's transformation into his father is complete. Martin repeats his father's abusive behaviour and just as he involved Martin as a boy in the abuse, so too does Martin involve Tom. The cycle has been repeated and the trauma has been passed on transgenerationally. Just as his father exhorted him to "Show him, Martin! Show him, son!" (*STS* 5), this scene ends with Martin exhorting "No! No!" He shouts at his son. Like this! Kick the little cunt like this!" (*STS* 188).

Martin's justification of the actions also echo his father's rationale. Early in the novel Martin reflects that his was "A family without links to the outside world, a house with windows that only looked out and a door permanently closed to uninvited strangers" (*STS* 25). The justification for this was his father's imperative that strangers would tear the family apart, "He remembers it all so clearly because his father had used the word 'love'. 'I love this family, I won't let anyone out there destroy it,' and he said the word with an intensity that shocked and frightened them" (*STS* 25). Martin has become equally paranoid in his belief that the world is against his family and that he must protect them, "If he could he'd build a wall round his house, a high wall with razor wire on the top, build it to keep the world out and away from his family" (*STS* 189). Just as his father explained away his abuse as a justification for teaching his sons to defend themselves, Martin now feels shame and anger "because he's let his children down, hasn't protected them from the scum that floats on the surface of the world. He hasn't taught

them how to defend themselves” (*STS* 189). Thus, his father’s abusive behaviour during his childhood is now repeated in his own family.

Martin’s increasingly violent acting out seems only to escalate. Park foreshadows this ominous narrative trajectory by employing another staple stylistic device of the trauma novel, intertextuality. Later in the novel, as Martin revisits his house to find a gun he had secreted there decades before, a memory of his father impinges on the present. He recalls a moment when, as his father slept, he took a knife from the kitchen drawer and held it to his father’s throat, “Like killing a pig he tells himself. Just like killing a pig. Slitting his throat from ear to ear, the blood spilling out like the gush of water” (*STS* 214). Martin lingers over his father, revelling in his position of power and control, “He moves closer, feels the weight of the knife in his hand. He thinks of the Shankill butchers, those loyal cutters of throats, and shivers” (*STS* 215). This performance of dominant masculinity enacted over a vulnerable, incapacitated father echoes a cognate scene in Eoin McNamee’s *Resurrection Man*, as Victor Kelly, the head of the Shankill butchers, shaves his physically incapacitated father, whose dark eyes are “devoid of the precedents of fatherhood” (127). Victor displays dominance over his father as, “he gripped the angle of his father’s jaw with his left hand and tilted it backwards...until the neck was painfully stretched” (127). He takes the razor to his father’s throat menacingly to “probe beneath the lather, touching the neck sinews, the windpipe, the carotid artery” (127). As his mother Dorcas remarks, “this was not like a man shaving his ill father” (127). In this referencing of McNamee’s novel, Park is foreshadowing Martin’s own irrevocable and irredeemable descent into violence and madness by paralleling it with Victor Kelly’s, a sadistic serial killer, who is shot and killed at the end of that novel.

Martin actively seeks out the UDA drug dealer responsible for selling drugs to his daughter, chasing up old paramilitary contacts until he reconnects with former childhood compatriot Jaunty. Jaunty is the head of an organised crime syndicate that was previously the UDA. Martin tracks Jaunty to a gentleman's club, where he finds him sitting vulnerable and naked in a Jacuzzi. As Martin raises his gun the novel is poised to culminate in the repetition of masculine violence espoused by Kelly and Martin's own father, as "the gun feels suddenly heavy in his hand. Take your stand. Show him, Martin. Make his eyes water. Make him step back" (*STS* 232). However, haunted by his father, Martin instead "drops the gun to his side and turns away and in his ears he hears a voice calling him 'a bastard,' 'a useless little cunt'" (*STS* 232). In so doing, however, Martin rejects the violent masculinity that has predominated his life, potentially breaking not only the cycle of hegemonic masculinity but also the perpetuation of abuse and trauma for which an essentialist paradigm argues. Instead Martin gathers his daughter's belongings and takes them to the museum, setting them up in a display of her life. Martin is depicted as undergoing a katabatic descent into the underworld from which he is potentially born again, and as the sun rises he is transfigured, "to warm himself with whatever heat the new day is able to muster" (*STS* 244).

### **3. ii. Alan and *The Light of Amsterdam***

While it may seem evident from the outset that Park's portrayal of Alan and the masculinity he embodies is antithetical to Martin's hegemonic hypermasculinity, there remain congruities between the two protagonists. Despite the fact that both men (like Park himself) come from working-class Protestant backgrounds, Alan has become a middle class, educated intellectual. An Art lecturer he is depicted as an intelligent yet highly insecure man, hyper self-conscious, anxious and prone to what the character terms as "sentimentality". Both protagonists commit

adultery, both with female artists, and both infidelities are single occurrences lasting only one night. Whereas for Martin, this indiscretion is buried along with his other secrets and never becomes known despite an exigent urge to tell his wife, Alan follows through on the same urge which results in his divorce from his wife and expulsion from the family home. Like Martin, Alan too is obsessed with the past, however while Martin's past is a persistent re-enactment of trauma, one from which he tries to flee – "There is no future – there is only past" (*STS* 100). Alan nostalgically idealises and longs for the simplicity of the past. It is a past in which he was still married to ex-wife Susan and had an easy relationship with his then infant son which he replays in his mind often, "stop the home movie just there – no need to roll it any further, just freeze-frame it, letting it become the future as well as the past" (*TLOA* 99-100). While he, like Martin, displays patterns of catastrophic thinking, anxiety and self-flagellation, the self-aware and tragicomic tone of Park's writing suggests this behaviour stems from neuroses rather than a pathologic reaction to trauma. While Alan's characterisation is a much more light-hearted take on masculinity as informed by the generalised anxiety endemic to contemporary society, there are still poignant and pertinent reflections in the novel on masculinity in contemporary Northern Irish post-conflict society.

Alan and David Park share numerous characteristics, qualities and backgrounds. Both Park and his protagonist have had Protestant, evangelical upbringings which, although both are atheist as adults, still influence their love and respect for the arts. Park describes in interview how, "As a child, and even now I wonder, what is the beauty of holiness" (Sansom). This is paralleled directly in Alan's struggles to articulate to his son that his evangelical upbringing somehow precluded an interest in transitory meaningless highs, that he was inspired instead by a "legacy of his childhood and all those years sitting looking at the text that spoke of the beauty of

holiness” (*TLOA* 201). For Alan that holiness and spirituality are now found in music and in art: “Anything that’s to do with the spirit, the soul or whatever you want to call it. When you play your music ... it’s coming from somewhere deep inside yourself” (*TLOA* 306). This is a sentiment espoused by Alan’s musical idol, Bob Dylan (who also at one point converted to evangelical Christianity), “I find the religiosity and philosophy in the music. I don’t find it anywhere else. Songs like ‘Let Me Rest on a Peaceful Mountain’ or ‘I Saw the Light’ — that’s my religion” (Gates). Indeed, when Sansom questions Park as to what makes good art, Park “puts on the opening bars of Dylan’s ‘Like a Rolling Stone’” (Sansom). Never before has Park fashioned a protagonist so heavily informed by his own life experiences, and this includes the relationship between Alan and his father.

While under no circumstances is Alan’s relationship with his father as profoundly traumatic as Martin’s is with his, a father wound is nonetheless apparent. As E.D. Miller explicates of the father wound, “Some men have experienced clear episodes of physical abuse at the hands of their fathers whereas others may have endured a more subtle form of psychological alienation” (198). While Park provides little narrative exposition regarding Alan’s relationship with his father, the information within the text is loaded with meaning. Alan wonders “if he could tell Jack about his own father, how nothing ever passed between them except indifference, of how their parallel lives never touched or connected in any way except for those rituals demanded by convention” (*TLOA* 222). This directly reflects the nature of the father wound, the internalised pain of an emotionally absent father. As Levant notes, “Many men are burdened with feelings that they never knew their fathers, nor how their fathers felt as men, nor if their fathers even liked them, nor even if their fathers ever really approved of them” (263). Alan’s

speculation is at the core of his issues with masculinity and clearly exacerbates his difficult relationship with his son.

In summarising contemporary research, Miller suggests that the father wound originates in a father's adoption of the traditional masculinist precepts of fatherhood: that a man is responsible for providing for his family, must remain emotionally detached, and often emotionally restrained, in his performance of fatherhood and masculinity. Miller explicates that "The adoption of such a rigid, stereotypic masculine role may be at the core of why the self-perceived father wound occurs" (196). This patriarchal, authoritarian role of the father is particularly endemic to the generation in which Park and protagonist Alan were growing up. In addition to both Park and his protagonist sharing an evangelical Protestant upbringing and hailing from working-class backgrounds in East Belfast, their fathers are strikingly similar. Both were working-class men, Park's father a factory store man and Alan's a labourer. In interview with Ian Sansom, Park's description of his own father parallels almost verbatim Alan's description of his, and both fathers, from their choice of newspaper to their professions, are subtly evocative of hegemonic masculinity. Park recalls that his father "gave his pay packet to my mother and she gave him enough money for a *Daily Mirror* every day and maybe a bar of chocolate once a week" (Sansom). Park's protagonist similarly remarks how his own father, "out of a labourer's wages, had provided for them and taken nothing for himself from the weekly pay packet except the few coins necessary to buy a paper and a bar of chocolate" (*TLOA* 232). Everything here conforms to traditional gendered prescriptions. Both men predicate their role as father along the construction of bread winner, solely responsible for providing for the family, and both altruistically give up their wages to the head of the household, typically the mother, asking for very little in return.

However beatific an example of traditional masculinity these men are, there is no mention here of more contemporary fatherhood concerns of demonstrative emotional intimacy, or open and honest communication. Indeed, it is this very lack of meaningful interaction that Alan painfully mourns, “their parallel lives never touched or connected in any way except for those rituals demanded by convention” (*TLOA* 222). Another issue in this case are the disparate constructions of masculinity embodied by both father and son, a point of contention clearly felt by Alan. There is no doubt that Alan’s life choices and personality are at odds with what his father envisaged for him, as the character ruefully reflects to Karen, “My father always wanted me to be a painter and decorator. He was probably right – I’d have made more money that’s for sure” (*TLOA* 124). This self-deprecating remark emphasises the difference between the two men. Alan’s father expects his son to have similar ideals and aspirations to himself, grounded in and informed by his working-class background. His son, however, aspires to be an artist, an occupation perhaps viewed by his father as an impractical and effeminate vocation. This gap between patriarchal expectation and filial desire is emblematic of the father wound in which “Dominant ideologies about work are translated through fathers to sons, shaping the expectations and satisfactions in the world of work” (Pease 12). The disconnect between the two worlds occupied and embodied by these men exacerbates the distance between them, from which Alan “sought to protect himself by insisting that his father hadn’t tried hard enough to understand him, to understand that he was different and wanted to live in a different world” (*TLOA* 232). It would be difficult not to draw parallels between a working-class factory foreman and his erudite son, former English teacher, now author. For Alan, the father wound is a painful one, and his contemplation of his broken relationship with his father marks “the second time that he had cried recently and it didn’t feel any better than the first. There was too much of it that felt like



sentimentality, a nostalgia for something he wasn't even sure had existed, so he wiped the few tears away and tried to stop" (*TLOA* 232). This is an example of how keenly and painfully Alan is aware of the father wound yet, prompted to tears, feels emasculated and tries to employ reason to overcome emotion. Given the competing masculinities involved and his lack of paternal approbation, it is possible that Alan's ambivalent and fragile construction of masculinity is directly informed by the trauma he suffered through his relationship with his father. Alan is truly representative of the movement away from old hegemonic masculinities, and is indicative of how, albeit slowly, for Northern Ireland, "the culture of the detached authoritarian father is giving way to a role of an involved, nurturing father. With this changing role, men may feel more at ease to become more nurturing fathers" (Miller 199). That a similar conflict mars his relationship with his own son is an irony not lost on Alan, who considers it "his punishment of course, the punishment to come to every son, as he became the father whose own son now turned his face away" (*TLOA* 232). This is a sentiment in keeping with the ideology that the father wound is one that is almost inevitably passed on from father to son, a transgenerational trauma.

At the start of the novel, Alan is overwhelmed by feelings of "sentiment" for the death of George Best, whom he idolised in much the same way as Park did. And like the author, Alan "unlike most of those around him could claim he actually saw him play at Windsor Park" (2). In *The Guardian* interview Park too notes having watched Best play, and mentions that he has a framed photograph of Best in his study. For Alan, Best's funeral is too much, and he finds himself crying, however he is detached enough from his feelings not to understand the provocation, "He didn't even know why he was crying. He hadn't cried since childhood" (*TLOA* 3). It is as if Alan is distancing himself from his emotions, countering his emasculation with the assertion that he hadn't cried since childhood, acknowledging the implication that "grown men

don't cry". Emotion is almost considered an indulgence, "he guessed he was crying for himself and knew that was a good reason to stop" (4). Indeed, during each point at which Alan feels emotional, he attempts to rationalise his feelings in order to overcome them and concomitantly derides himself for what he perceives as his weakness and "sentimentality". While today, and indeed arguably even in 2005, the society's ideal 'new man' is to be more communicative and in touch with his emotions, Alan is still clearly reticent to move in this direction. Instead he perceives his emotions and sentimentality as having effeminising connotations and is ashamed of them as they erode his sense of masculine self. This constrained emotionality and stoicism are reflections of a masculine society, particularly in Northern Ireland. Park alludes to the dysfunctional societal attitude towards trauma in Northern Ireland through the wry observation that if Alan "were American he would return home and go into therapy, spill it all out in front of some stranger with a sincere face and ask them to put it all back together for him" (*TLOA* 233). The tone and imagery Park uses deftly reflects traditionally held societal beliefs about trauma, victimisation and psychotherapy. A traumatic event is assumed to be something to be held inside, contained rather than "spilled out". To share something personal with "a stranger" is perceived to be indiscrete and potentially emasculating. Park illustrates the hypocrisy of the expectation by Northern Irish society wherein, as Alan iterates, "it was a question of catching himself on, pulling himself together and taking up a socially approved therapy such as drinking too much or trying desperately to have meaningless sex with people he didn't like" (*TLOA* 233). Park is condemning the masculinist attitude at once pervasive in and endemic to Northern Irish society, a society in which traditional masculine precepts such as stoicism are valorised and held as a standard not only for the male gender but society as a whole. It is no accident that a society

which praises hypermasculine stereotypes produces hypermasculine yet dysfunctional men, as Gordon notes earlier in the novel, men such as George Best, Alex Higgins and Van Morrison.

#### **4.i Martin and Tom: Transgenerational Trauma in *Swallowing the Sun***

Despite the well-intentioned changes Martin has implemented to free himself and his family from the violent, patriarchal masculinities espoused by his father and the sectarian community, it is clear that his relationship with his young son Tom has nonetheless been indelibly marked. By trying to shield his family from his past life, his inability to discuss his trauma in a conducive way has only alienated him further from his family, and potentially perpetuated maladaptive traits onto the next generation, particularly in regard to his thirteen-year-old son. Tom is clearly emasculated. He is the brunt of his family's jokes, does not conform to his father's expectations of masculinity, and the two suffer from a stultified relationship.

Tom, unlike his sister, is depicted as vulnerable, depressed, neglected and clearly self-identifies as a victim. Park's deft portrayal of this young boy, both through the eyes of his father and the extradiegetic narrator, clearly delineates pathological symptomology of trauma. Tom is always depicted as emotionally isolated from his family and potentially depressive, Martin recalls a family moment and remarks, "Even Tom had laughed. Just for a moment, before he realised he was laughing, Tom had laughed" (*STS* 7). This one positive moment of inclusion is undermined by its exceptional occurrence, subtly emphasising Tom's normative position of exclusion and unhappiness. Tom is also physically isolated from his family, preferring the company of the family's computer and his room over familial socialisation. As his sister cruelly points out, "Stay in your own cave, your hidey-hole, your Stygian gloom" (*STS* 21). With an air of detached distaste, his father notes that Tom shows signs of physical self-neglect, from the "dirt under his fingernails" to "the faint cheesy smell from him and it seems to stir and seep from

his trainers as he moves forward (*STS* 47, 22). This distaste at his son's physical appearance may reflect an unconscious sense of shame in Martin, as these are overt signs of his son's own trauma and therefore his weakness and vulnerability. Martin is perhaps aware on some level that he is responsible for his son's state yet also repulsed by the lack of masculinity his son displays.

The most overt physical symptom of Tom's trauma is his recent and increasingly problematic weight gain. So detached is Martin from his son that he is unable to detect any problem until it is too late, "Where did the weight come from? It seemed to creep up on him and now it's getting worse all the time" (*STS* 47). Tom's relationship with food is depicted as unhealthy as he turns to comfort food in moments of stress and trauma, sifting "the sweets in his pockets through his fingers as if they are gold coins, talismans of good fortune" (*STS* 129). Secreting food to eat in private – his mother finds "a store of hidden sweets and chocolate in his room" (*STS* 57). Tom also avoids interaction in school and particularly with the school bullies by skipping assembly and hiding under the stairs to eat sweets. His "fingers find one of the sweets and he takes off the paper without removing it from his pocket", an action evidently practiced through repetition (*STS* 131). These are the more overt physical manifestations of Tom's unhappiness of which to an extent his parents are aware, however Tom's feelings of helplessness and trauma permeate his innermost being. Like his father, feelings of emasculation and guilt prevent Tom from being able to communicate them, a learned behaviour characteristic of transgenerational trauma, in which silence may be enacted on "the level of the individual, family and national level, often in an interlinked fashion" (Bar-On 22).

It is clear that the relationship between Martin and his son is one characterised by silence and avoidance. Martin never opens up to his son about his own abusive relationship with his father yet as Bar-On notes in his research into transgenerational trauma on secondary

generations, “Untold stories often pass more powerfully from generation to generation than stories that can be recounted” (21). How these stories, or rather the traumatic effects of these stories, are passed on is a matter of contention, however within Park’s narrative it is possible to discern several modalities of transmission, from the antinomial *a priori* transmission of aporetic memory as iterated by the critical trauma paradigm, to the more constructionist psychosocial factors that contribute to the integrative paradigm of transgenerational trauma used by contemporary psychologists. In short, while Tom’s symptoms of PTSD may have been transmitted essentially, via biological, epigenetic means, it is more likely that his behaviour is learned, modelled on his father’s dysfunctional behaviour.

One potential mechanism through which transgenerational trauma may be transmitted is via “distinct styles of parenting or suboptimal patterns of family interaction” (Doucet and Rovers 96). Martin’s reluctance to communicate with his son on any but the most superficial level, and never emotionally, reflects work by Lin et al. which suggests that when parents avoid difficult conversations surrounding trauma and traumatic experience, children too learn to be avoidant in discussing emotional or traumatic subjects in their own lives (196). This is evidenced in Park’s text. One poignant example follows the news of Rachel’s death as Martin sees his son sitting silently at the computer “as if everything is just as it always is, the only movement the press and squirm of his fingers. How can he do it? How can he sit there and not give a shit?” (*STS* 102). When Martin, enraged, approaches him, he realises as Tom looks “up at him, the lenses of his glasses are fogged and from behind their frame slides a single globular tear that trembles for a second like mercury before it slithers down the flickering frieze of his cheek” (*STS* 103).

Neither speak to each other and Martin, driven by panic, escapes “out of the house he now feels is suffocating him, slowly squeezing out his last gasps of air” (*STS* 103). Tom, like his

father, is unable to verbally express his pain and loss, even or rather especially, to his father. Martin is depicted as well intentioned in his wish to mend his relationship with his son, as he repeatedly “tells himself that he’ll spend more time with him, maybe try to find some sport or physical activity they could do together” (*STS* 103). However, Martin never makes good on these promises and even self-sabotages these attempts. Forced by his wife to try to reconnect to his son, Martin takes Tom to see the Belfast Giants in an ice hockey match. In the car before the match they are provided with ample opportunity to talk without distraction, however Martin “decides to leave it until just before the game – when they’re sitting with nothing else to do and the start of the game can bring a natural end to the conversation because as yet he doesn’t know what the conclusion will be” (*STS* 71). Obviously a loud and plentiful crowd is not going to be a conducive environment in which to establish a connection with his son, so the potentially poignant conversation between the two is punctuated tragically by audience participation. Just as Martin is about to articulate the “one thing I’ve never really said before” the conversation is engulfed in a wave of the audience dancing the YMCA, “so whatever was going to be said slips away as the packed arena shapes letters with their hands and the swelling chorus of voices drowns out his own faltering words” (*STS* 74).

Work by Kellerman suggests that in traumatised parents, the inability to contain intense emotions may result in unconscious utilisation of projection mechanisms. The parent may project emotions such as “persecution, aggression, shame and guilt” onto their child (284). Resultantly the child may “identify with the projected parts of their father’s emotions and perceive his experiences and feelings as his own” (284). In essence, the traumatised parent transposes the emotional effects of their own trauma onto their child, who reciprocally identifies with their parent through this transposition. One potential example of this is early in the novel, when the

Warings celebrate Rachel's birthday. Jealous of his sister being given a coveted mobile phone, Tom pleads for one himself, to which his father rhetorically asks to whom Tom, being friendless, could possibly make a call. Even Martin is aware that "it is an unkind thing to ask but something made him do it to his son who has no friends except the family computer" (*STS* 18).

Furthermore, despite the cruelty of this behaviour both his mother and sister "smile despite themselves" (*STS* 18). It is clear Tom feels like a victim within his own family, an undercurrent of which is felt by other family members, evidenced by his sister's cruel joke that he use a mobile phone "to phone Esther Rantzen on Childline, tell them all his problems. How badly everyone treats him" (*STS* 19). While his mother is quick to interject that "No one treats Tom badly" the sentiment rings hollow considering their complicity in what has gone before. It is as though Martin is both sensing and projecting a sense of shame and weakness onto his son which reciprocally informs Tom's behaviour and identity. This mutual inherence of common identity, Kellerman argues, may also lead to the children themselves replicating the disturbances of their parents and becoming liable to similarly transpose these emotions onto their own children, just as Martin has done.

Doucet and Rovers describe how the direct mechanism of trauma transmission is "via unconscious channels of intrapsychic influence and style of familial communication" (96). This incorporates two mechanisms: firstly, the child's vicarious identification with their parents' suffering, and secondly the child's intuitive responsibility to attempt to compensate for their parents' suffering, to somehow vicariously heal their parents' trauma (Doucet and Rovers 96). Indeed, Esther Rashkin suggests that particularly in cases in which the parent never discloses the causative traumatic event, "the secrecy serves to stimulate the child to uncover the parents' past and make the parents' trauma visible in his or her own life" (106). Thus, as Kestenberg noted in

their research into transgenerational trauma in the children of Holocaust survivors, children display a propensity towards inhering and repeating their parents' trauma, "These children feel they have a mission to live in the past and to change it so that their parents' humiliation, disgrace and guilt can be converted into victory over the oppressors" (101). Such an example in the novel may be Tom's suffering of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of several school bullies. Tom, like his father at the same age, is a victim of physical and emotional abuse and while Martin suffered at the hands of his father, Tom experiences trauma at the hand of hypermasculine bullies in his all boys' school. There are numerous parallels between their experiences and reactions to the abuse. Tom's abusers, like Martin's father, seek to intimidate, dominate and emasculate Tom, particularly in regards to his weight, "Great tits, Fat Boy ... Why don't you borrow your Ma's bra" (*STS* 158). In addition to slapping Tom, they humiliate him by tipping "his possessions into the toilet or out the classroom window ... [they] take his money and sweets" (49). The abuse evokes a sense of shame and culpability. Martin's recollection of "the shame he feels at being different, at being stained" (*STS* 42) is echoed in Tom's reflection that, "if its personal he must deserve it for something he's done, something he is" (*STS* 184). Tom yearns to be invisible, "shrinking his body to nothing but the merest vibration of space" (*STS* 179), just as his father before him repeatedly tries "to make himself invisible", "likes to be invisible" and prides himself on "knowing when to be invisible" (*STS* 1, 23, 27). It is pertinent to note that both father and son, without ever discussing the matter, both attempt to soothe themselves by repeatedly reciting lists. Martin frequently repeats the names of items in the museum, "the stone axes, giant wheels and cogs of polished machinery, of money thrown in the water" (*STS* 98). While Tom recites the litany of names he is called in school, "Fat Boy, Tits,



Fatboy Slim, Willie the Whale, Blubber” as if by repeating the names he takes ownership and control over them, making them “badges he’s been given to wear” (*STS* 179,182).

While the society and community into which Tom has been born is totally different to that of his father’s, one may discern that many of the traditional masculine precepts and proscriptions still apply, even as recently as 2004. Both Martin and Tom feel an “all-pervading sense of shame” about their abuse, and both are compelled to secrecy. Martin considers the “thought of the world finding out about home frightened him more than anything that had to be endured there” (*STS* 28). Martin keeps the secret and represses the traumatic experience and connotative emotions, “giving nothing away, holding it in” (*STS* 27). For Tom also, there is a sense of masculine code, expectations of silence and stoicism that compel him to keep the abuse a secret. Indubitably a leftover from the legacy of the Troubles, Tom refuses to trade his litany of names for new ones he deems worse such as, “Tout, Snitch, Supergrass, Blubber Bake, Squealer” (*STS* 82). To open up about his emotions, even to a counsellor, and admit that he’s been bullied is to admit weakness to someone “who’ll nod and disguise their disgust at him with sympathy” (*STS* 181). Instead Tom tries to laugh along with the bullies who call him names, because “the worst thing you can be is someone who can’t take a joke” (*STS* 75). This masculine prescription permeates the hierarchy of the school as even Tom’s PE teacher taunts him, instructing him not to use “all the school’s hot water on that beautiful body” (*STS* 160). Moreover, Tom is cognisant that to react overtly to the name calling would be “to show a weakness, a particular point of pain, is only to invite more of the same” (*STS* 75).

Park highlights the gendered discrepancy in attitude towards emotional communication. Amongst Martin’s male colleagues the men discuss only superficial issues or safe subjects, such as his daughter’s academic success, not emotional issues of any pertinence, let alone the difficult

relationship between father and son. Thus, when Alison asks Martin “What do other fathers do?” Martin has no response. Problematic emotional discourse is proscribed among men adhering to the hegemonic imperative. Park highlights this gender disparity as Alison later speaks to her female colleagues in a female-dominated work environment, dinner ladies in a school who are unanimously supportive. There, “All the women are kind to her. There’s lots of hugs and hand-holding...they share their own memories of suffering” (*STS* 144-145). While Alison, as a woman, is depicted as able to garner support from female colleagues, there exists no such recourse for Martin or Tom.

Tom also demonstrates characteristics of “father hunger” as a result of the distant relationship with his father. Father hunger, while related to the father wound, is nonetheless distinct from it and defines the emotional vulnerability and desire for a father figure in the lives of men and boys. As Miller, quoting Erikson, notes, “Father hunger can occur in the absence of both physical and emotional ties [to fathers] and is often transmitted across generations” (Miller 196). In Tom’s case, this need is filled by his uncle Rob, from whom he has been estranged his whole life. In the short time since Rachel’s death that connection has been re-established Tom has “already been out with him three times” (*STS* 142). Already the two have a more positive connection than Tom has with his father as the narrator relates, “It’s great to have a mate and Rob’s the best mate he could ever have” (*STS* 141). It is perhaps not surprising that the two form a connection, as neither emulates a typically hegemonic masculinity and both are distanced from Martin, who sees himself responsible for, and resentful of, their weakness. Tom notes with relief that Rob never mentions his weight nor does he mention his sister, “Maybe it’s because he never really knew her; maybe that’s the reason he never says her name or refers to what happened” (*STS* 142). This allows Tom to be the primary focus of his uncle’s attention, rather than living in

his sister's shadow. The male to male familial relationship gives Tom the attention he so desperately needs from his father. Indeed, despite having met only three times, Rob is able to intuit that Tom is being bullied in school, whereas Martin realises this too late.

That Tom is a transgenerational victim of Martin's childhood trauma cannot be denied; the potential for trauma to be repeated is reinforced through the repetition of events and the structure of the novel. However, Park allows for autonomy and agency to play a vital role in potentially breaking the cycle of trauma. On the boat to Scotland, which marks the beginning of a new life with his mother and aunt, Tom's narrative trajectory culminates in a series of epiphanies, all of which Park seems to link with the *leitmotif* of aging, entering pubescence and moving on both literally and metaphorically from childhood. Recent physical changes have prompted Tom to consider "that his body is not ballast – something that weights him to the world and gives him the protection of solidity like a moat or a castle wall – but something that holds him back from where he wants to go" (*STS* 225). The onset of puberty reframes his perceptions and he finds himself "stirring and stiffening" in his fantasies and "in the dampness and embarrassment of the morning light he senses for a fleeting second what it must be like to be loved" (*STS* 226). With this newfound maturity Tom considers his sister Rachel "and for the first time realises that in all the time they were brother and sister they never spoke to each other, not about anything that was important" (*STS* 227). Park has Tom, in some small way, face his ambivalent emotions towards his sister and take responsibility for them. Taking Rachel's mobile phone, the symbol of communication his father so hated and rejected, Tom "holds it to his ear and after a few moments he speaks in it. Speaks to her" (*STS* 227). Finally able to articulate all the feelings he had previously repressed, he vocalises his regret at not being a better brother, his resentment that "she got almost all their parents' love so he only got the little bit that was left and

that wasn't fair" (*STS* 228). It is only at this point, when he can confront his feelings that Tom begins to cry. While resolute "that everything's going to be different for him now, because he's going to work hard" Tom acknowledges that he is sad "that she won't be there to help him when he doesn't know how to do things, because he needs lots of help" (*STS* 228). Tom's ability to accept and symbolically work through the difficult emotions of loss and vulnerability, clearly differentiates him from his father and posits a potentially positive future in which he can learn and construct a more generative masculine identity to break the cycle of transgenerational trauma. Tom's positivity is marred, however, by the shadow of his parents' actions. He feels that "something terrible's going to happen but he doesn't know what he can do to stop it" (*STS* 228). He plaintively asks his sister for advice "but all he hears is the restless moan of the rising wind" (*STS* 228). Park leaves Tom on the precipice of a new and potentially positive life, however it is not one that will be devoid of trauma. Tom must yet emerge from the shadow of the traumatic legacy he has inherited.

#### **4.ii. Alan and Jack: Transgenerational Trauma in *The Light of Amsterdam***

Although Jack is presented only indirectly in the novel, through Alan's fallible and unreliable narrative perspective, there is much that may be inferred from his characterisation. It is initially tempting to, as his father does, attribute Jack's increasingly erratic behaviour to the rigors of 'teen trauma', a normalised response to adolescence and the conflict with his father, which is a natural result of the secondary separation-individuation process. However, given the mitigating factor of his parents' divorce and perhaps the influence of his father's own anxiety, Jack oscillates between the withdrawn and rebellious behaviour endemic to puberty and the potentially more deep-seated, problematic behaviour associated with traumatological symptomology.

Separation-individuation is broadly defined as a process “by which a person becomes increasingly differentiated from a past or present relational context” (Karpel, 1976, p. 66). It is an essential psychological and organisational process one must undergo to attain individuality, independence and maturity. As Lapsley and Stey affirm, “the goal of individuation is the capacity for autonomous selfhood in the context of ongoing relational commitments” (1). While this process is at play in early infancy, adolescence marks the “second phase of separation-individuation” (Lapsley and Stey 2). This is a difficult transition in which the adolescent must “disengage from or transcend the internalised representations of caregivers formed in early childhood and establish a sense of self that is distinct and individuated” and by so doing, become less dependent on parental affirmation to inform their sense of self and self-worth (Lapsley and Stey 2). This is evident in Jack’s repeated attempts to assert his independence from his father throughout the novel. He says, “Dad I’m not a child – I could look after myself for a weekend” (*TLOA* 96), “Dad I’m not a child I don’t want to ride a bike” (*TLOA* 217). These clear pleas for autonomy and respect carry through to his desire to have his opinions taken seriously. Sensing his father’s rejection of his interest in conspiracy theories he plaintively retorts, “Dad this is for real, not kid’s made-up stuff” (*TLOA* 124). Jack’s reticence to open up and engage with his father, preferring to be, as his father terms it, “shrouded in the protective fog of mystery” (*TLOA* 205) is a defence mechanism against what Jack perceives as his father’s constant judgment and rejection of his self-individuation. There is an intrinsic paradox inherent to the separation process, the impetus and drive towards adulthood and autonomy and “mourning over the loss of childhood identifications” (Lapsley and Stey 1). This “ambivalence over autonomy” is most clearly evident in Park’s portrayal of Jack’s hesitation to make important life decisions. As a result of his parents’ divorce Jack must decide whether to stay in Belfast with his father or leave

for Spain with his mother, an ironically adult decision that will profoundly affect the rest of his life yet stemming from a position over which he as a child has no control. Resentful of the situation he feels he has been placed in, Jack states, “I don’t want to live with you. I don’t want to live in Spain. You don’t understand!” (*TLOA* 220). While Alan perceives Jack as “speaking to him from a seemingly bottomless well of selfishness” (*TLOA* 220) Jack’s self-orientated behaviour stems from the narcissism necessary “to sustain the impoverished ego until self-esteem is regulated from internal sources”, described as a key characteristic of the separation-individuation process (Lapsley and Stey 1). For Jack, the divorce itself symbolises another key aspect of “the loss of childhood identifications” – the realisation that his father is in fact fallible. The divorce not only crystallises his feelings of powerlessness but also his disappointment in his father. Far from the ideal model of masculinity, Jack sees his father’s affair as an incomprehensible betrayal, not only of his mother but to the whole family, “I don’t understand”, Jack insisted. “Why did you not think of Mum or Caroline or me before you had it off with some slag you were only supposed to be teaching who was half your age?” (*TLOA* 218). Not only is this indiscretion symbolic of Jack’s acknowledgement of his father’s fallible and imperfect nature (the core of the essential separation-individuation process), but it is also the perceived cause of the consequent painful changes over which Jack has no control. Jack articulates the trauma of the divorce, of seeing the pain in his mother, when he finally confronts his father, “So why did she end up crying every night and coming up with some stupid, weird idea about going to Spain?” (*TLOA* 220). Jack is affected on a profound level not only by his own pain, but that of his parents, “It’s not just mum who’s having a breakdown, you are as well. You’ve both completely lost the plot” (*TLOA* 316). This trauma is compounded by his mother’s new partner who Jack also sees as taking his father’s established role in the family. His anger at his father, the

divorce and his powerlessness fuels a powerful hatred for Gordon, the perceived usurper. While some anger towards the man and the situation may be warranted, and even welcomed on Alan's behalf, the level of animosity perturbs his father and only alienates the two even further, "This expression of hate he'd heard before, sometimes directed at the teacher he'd got into trouble over, a few times at some boy in school, that despite its superficial childishness was invested with something he found disturbing" (*TLOA* 302). Jack's recent anti-social behaviour, "detentions for posting an inappropriate picture of his teacher on Bebo" and "the breaking of an elderly neighbour's window with a golf ball" are characteristic examples of acting out, demonstrating and catharsising feelings of anger and powerlessness. However, while the wearing of only black clothing, monosyllabic responses and emptying his room may be seen as the superciliousness of youth, issues such as selective eating, self-harm and social anxiety are iterations of something much deeper, a potentially more pathological response to trauma.

Park's portrayal of Jack's self-harm, depicted through the eyes of his father and the reaction of the school, also raises interesting and pertinent questions as to Northern Irish society's attitude towards trauma. Jack's self-harm is described as the "thin little red scratches on his lower arm that he had inflicted with the edge of a protractor and for which he wasn't able, or for which he was unwilling, to give any rational explanation" (*TLOA* 6). Park describes Alan's "embarrassment" at his negligence, and how the school noticed it and had to bring it to his attention. The school's response, however, is dismissive, quick to detract from the severity of the incident suggesting that "self-harm was fashionable" and perfunctorily offers "counselling for Jack, which he refused" (*TLOA* 6). The prolificacy of the ideation of self-harm in the media notwithstanding, to dismiss self-harming as fashionable, in a society still struggling with the legacy of a 30-year conflict, seems negligent. In fact, self-harm has become increasingly

prevalent in Northern Ireland. Research from the Northern Ireland registry of self-harm shows that from 2012 there was a 20% increase in the rate of self-harm among 10 to 34-year-olds. Moreover, the rate among 15 to 19-year-old males increased by a total of 30% (16). As such the school's assurance that this is nothing but a fad rings hollow and if anything the fact that a teenage boy is self-harming should be even more reason to investigate. The school's reaction, however, represents a larger societal attitude in Northern Ireland towards trauma, a predilection to diminish and gloss over anything that detracts from an overall narrative of hypernormalisation. This echoes Park's illustration of the predominant attitude in Northern Ireland towards opening up and expressing feeling in the narrator's remark that "if he were American he would return home and go into therapy, spill it all out in front of some stranger with a sincere face... But he lived in Belfast so it was a question of catching himself on, pulling himself together and taking up a socially approved form of therapy such as drinking too much" (*TLOA* 233).

What Park is satirising is the tendency of Northern Irish society to reject and demean as ostentatious and emasculating thoughts of therapy and communication, and rather to repress feelings of hurt and trauma and subsume them into alcoholism. While Park does this with humour, it does not diminish the veracity or profundity of the statement and makes one question the motivation behind the school's response and how such a societal attitude may impact the next generation of young men. While the reader cannot know the extent to which Jack's self-harm is to be considered a pathological response to trauma, when taken into consideration with other aspects of his behaviour, it intimates, if not outright states, that this is a possibility.

It is also possible that Jack, like Tom Waring, has an unhealthy relationship with food, however while Tom eats compulsively for comfort and is overweight, Jack is the reverse, presented as excessively thin, his father wryly reflecting that "the menu of what he ate had



incrementally reduced itself to a core of about five items” (*TLOA* 6). While this comment initially appears flippant, its brevity is undermined by the repeated descriptions of Jack’s overly thin frame as Alan, with increasing alarm, notes his son’s “thin-fingered hands” and “thin blue veined wrists” (*TLOA* 23, 230), “the memory of the thin whiteness of his son’s body” (*TLOA* 184). Moreover Jack is adamant about which types of food he will eat, insisting on “a plain cheeseburger (the word plain repeated with emphasis)” (*TLOA* 139) and when the wrong burger is brought, under the pressure of his father making a scene, he eats it, “meticulously scrap[ing] every vestige of salad and dressing free from his burger, as if clearing it of toxic waste” (*TLOA* 144). The description of Jack’s eating habits has parallels with the symptomology of ARFID (Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder), an eating disorder diagnosis introduced in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5* in 2013. While not associated with the dysmorphic motivations behind anorexia or bulimia, the dramatic restriction of one’s diet and resulting weight loss typifies this condition. As research by Teri Nicely et al. iterates, “Some selective eaters have sensory concerns related to the taste, smell, colour, or texture of foods, which may limit their intake to such a narrow range of acceptable foods that weight loss, or failure to gain appropriate weight, may occur” (Nicely et al. 23). Nicely also notes that this condition affects more males than females and is a common comorbidity of anxiety disorders (21). Given that this is a relatively recent diagnosis it is unlikely that Park was aware of this type of eating disorder when writing the novel, but its presence here is nonetheless pertinent, especially considering that, according to the *DSM 5*, environmental risk factors for avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder include “familial anxiety” (21).

The incident inside *Burger King* suggests Jack’s proclivity towards anxiety. As his father attempts to change the burger he realises, “how Jack almost whispered in public and it suddenly

struck him that one of his son's greatest fears was of drawing attention to himself, an acute self-consciousness that probably made this whole episode his idea of hell" (*TLOA* 144). Again, while shyness and a reluctance to put oneself forward are not necessarily pathological traits in isolation, when considering Jack's behaviour as a whole, it may be indicative of the fear of social situations that involve interaction with other people. One of the common symptoms of social anxiety is muscle twitching, which Alan observes in his son on several occasions, "his son seemed to suffer from occasional twitches and tics, inexplicable little physical stutters that came and went in the blink of an eye" (*TLOA* 200). Later in the novel Alan observes of his son that "he was increasingly becoming a boy of tics and involuntary movements as if sparked by some inner electricity at curious odds with the comatose exterior" (*TLOA* 354). This could emulate Kellermann's observation that often those parents displaying clear symptomology of PTSD such as anxiety transmit these emotions onto their children, whose own "anxious behaviour was clearly learned through modelling" (266).

This is perhaps the motivation behind Jack's use of cannabis. Jack's reliance on marijuana may also suggest deeper issues than typical teenage experimentation. At the start of the novel, as Alan lists his son's various anti-social crimes, suggesting he sees him as a nuisance rather than a genuinely troubled child, he remarks deprecatingly about his son's possession of "a relatively small amount of cannabis in a bedside table" (*TLOA* 6). Though this, as Alan notes, does not render his son "a professional smack head" (*TLOA* 198), there remains a suggestion that Alan is deliberately manipulating and minimising the gravity of the situation. Addressing Alan's wife and son, the narrator tells us that Alan "had eventually steered them both into a calm bringing admission that it was really only an experiment and their son didn't have a habit or want to get into it big time" (*TLOA* 198).

This ambiguous portrayal is deliberate on Park's part, as we, like Alan, only have Jack's word on the matter. This is particularly portentous at the end of the novel, when the security's drug sniffing dogs target Jack, barking and chasing him. Asking his son if he has brought drugs, Jack replies "No I haven't," and his son's tone of hurt anger made him believe him" (*TLOA* 370). The ambiguity in the novel highlights how the reader, like Alan, cannot know for sure if this is the case, however as a result of their time together, and despite contradictory evidence, Alan eventually decides, as Karen did of her daughter, that he must accept his son on his son's terms. As Park iterates, "You want them to share your moral values, but that's not how it works. It's about going on even when love its difficult" (Sansom).

The cyclical structure of *Swallowing the Sun* is a nuanced, comprehensive, multilayered representation of trauma and a reflection of the abreactive trauma paradigm. Park adds a further sociocultural dimension to this paradigm by reflecting the prevailing culture of silence in Northern Ireland, which exacerbates and perpetuates trauma on individual, familial and societal levels. While *The Light of Amsterdam*, devoid of the context of the Troubles, is a more uplifting novel, it similarly explores traumatic masculinity and how the father wound may be cyclically perpetuated as a specifically masculine, transgenerational trauma. However, Balaev's argument that adherence to the prescriptions of the abreactive trauma paradigm leads to a deterministic and reductive interpretation of trauma in literature, in which all responses to trauma are inherently pathologic, is disrupted here. Park's characters retain the autonomy and agency reflected in contemporary, integrative models of transgenerational trauma, rather than adhering strictly to one finite traumatological paradigm.

Indeed, these narratives potentially enact the contemporary research into transgenerational trauma and resilience. Resilience is a crucial and positive response to trauma

defined as “the capacity for adapting successfully and functioning competently, despite experiencing chronic stress or adversity following exposure to prolonged or severe trauma” (Cicchetti and Cohen 165). This response is perhaps most clearly evidenced by Rachel in *Swallowing the Sun*, the academically successful student with a bright future. While Tom is affected negatively by the effects of transgenerational trauma, Rachel conversely appears to flourish. Within her limited narrative one may discern crucial cognitive and behavioural indicators of resilience. Mary Pember in her article “Intergenerational Trauma: Understanding Natives’ Inherited Pain” delineates the American Psychological Association’s findings on characteristics that promote resilience. These include making connections, moving towards goals, accepting change as natural, self-discovery, a positive outlook and self-care (8). One of the most critical of the findings, however, was the ability to “Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems” (Pember 8). This particular characteristic is espoused by Rachel, who recites lines from a Robert Frost poem whenever she is frightened because “It helps her to think that just maybe the things that are meant to scare you are the very things that will take you in their arms and hold you tighter than anyone ever can” (*STS* 52). While Rachel is not immune to feelings of pressure in regards to her academic career she is still able to successfully move toward her goals, looks forward to adulthood and is surrounded by friends. That Rachel, more than anyone in her family, displays characteristics of resilience and success underlines the tragedy of her death and the death of positive forward momentum she represents.

Rachel’s mother Alison also eventually displays characteristics of resilience, coming off the sedatives to which she was temporarily addicted and facing the pain and reality left by her daughter’s death. It is Alison who instigates the idea that they finally clear Rachel’s bedroom and move on as a family and, toward the end of the novel, decides that she will quit her job at the

canteen and follow her daughter's footsteps in going back into education. That the women in this novel, and indeed in *The Light of Amsterdam*, are depicted as capable, independent and able to move on from trauma is no accident, especially when considered in light of Park's depiction of Alison surrounded by fellow female colleagues who open up to her about their pain and traumatic memories. It is clear that Park's portrayal highlights the gender disparity in communication and emotional support. Gender dictates permit women to be more open, more emotionally and physically demonstrative with each other, as emphasised by the "hugs and hand-holding" Alison receives. While Alison is reminded by her female friends that "You've lots of people here to talk to, people who care about you", no such recourse is permissible for the men in Park's novels (*STS* 147). These men are, rather, proscribed from these actions in order to emulate hegemonic ideals of masculinity. As Miller notes, "Hegemonic masculinity is also viewed as having many maladaptive aspects that cause men to live up to unrealistic ideals" (200). This gender disparity enforced by social dictates of hegemonic masculinity is an issue close to Park's heart. Speaking in interview with *The Belfast Telegraph*, Park remarks that, "I think men find it more difficult to share what's inside and they feel the need to conform to stereotype and many don't have a network of support. It's a generalisation but it can be a problem. They don't have enough trust to open up about themselves" (Sansom).

Research by Kia-Keating et al. on male victims of abuse found that "in their paths toward recovery, the participants repeatedly described both containing and resisting traditional masculine roles and made conscious choices not to become perpetrators" (170). Part of envisaging alternative constructions of masculinity includes openly discussing and dismissing these "masculinity myths" (170). Park subverts the determinism of the abreactive paradigm in both novels by depicting both Martin and Alan undergoing katabatic rebirths, potentially

becoming transfigured and transcending their previous construction of masculinity. In interview with Sue Leonard, Park iterates that though he is no longer a proponent of the evangelical, Baptist faith that “there are elements of the Baptist background that linger with me; some of those central images from the bible, like transfiguration and transcendence” (Leonard). While the potential exists for these protagonists to become reborn and embody a new masculinity, there is nonetheless a clear distinction between the two. While Martin awakes and goes forth to “warm himself with whatever heat the new day is able to muster” the cold light of day might not be so warming (*STS* 244). Having embarked on his journey for revenge and threatened Jaunty, “ex” UDA commander and current head of organised crime, with a gun, not to mention having committed crimes including breaking into the Ulster Museum, one wonders what the new day can realistically bring to Martin Waring. Like his father, Waring still emulates hegemonic masculinity, a masculinity which, like Martin himself, at the turn of the millennium was becoming increasingly anachronistic. As his family is fond of teasing, “You belong in a museum, Dad,’ Rachel says and everyone, including Tom smiles” (*STS* 22). Park’s message seems to be that the type of masculinity Martin embodies is part of the past and should be left there.

Alan, on the other hand, embodies a different, more modern masculinity, distinct from that of his father. The character of Alan represents a divergence from the hegemonic masculinities often considered responsible for perpetuating the father wound and introduces a more contemporary construction of fatherhood. This reflects a generational “rejection of traditional fathering practices that may have contributed to such wounds” as Miller explains, “fathers today are increasingly adopting a ‘new involved father role’ that is more welcoming of emotional expression and involvement in a child’s life” (194). Alan’s relationship captures the difficulty for a generation of men to embody a more generative construction of fatherhood

without role models of their own. Alan's neurotic stream of consciousness and anxieties may be depicted as humorous; however, it is this self-investigation that enables him to envisage new possibilities. Park's protagonist displays what Mormon and Floyd suggest that scholars should be concerned with, "the issue of how men come to understand aspects of themselves through both their roles as father and as a son" (200). It is through self-reflection and examination of his own father wound that Alan comes to the consensus that one must, as Park iterates, "give your child love without forcing your values on them" (Sansom). While Alan truly feels the pain of his own father wound, he acknowledges that "love is the price to be paid for bringing a child into the world" and so stands with his son regardless of their differences (*TLOA* 371). Alan and Jack's relationship has a much more positive outcome, exemplifying Pleck's contention that "you cannot heal your father, but you can let your child help you to heal yourself" (223).

## Chapter Four: Ageing Masculinities: Not Just ‘A Young Man’s Game’— Gendering

### Gerontology in *Midwinter Break* and *The Truth Commissioner*

In her review of Bernard MacLaverty’s novel *Midwinter Break*, which depicts a couple in their sixth decade of marriage, Anne Enright remarks in *The Irish Times* that, “The world is full of long-married people, and literature almost devoid of them.” Northern Irish society, like many societies worldwide, has an ageing population, however there is little literary representation of the elderly in the post-conflict literary corpus. As we have seen, contemporary Northern Irish fiction has been largely dominated by the youth-oriented *bildungsroman*, as represented in the *bildung* formats of the coming-out novel, but also in novels such as Robert McLiam Wilson’s *Ripley Bogle*, or Glenn Patterson’s *Fat Lad*. Featuring young male protagonists largely within a Troubles narrative, these *bildungsromane* portray masculinity in Northern Ireland as a ‘young man’s game.’ Notably absent are the *reifungsromane*, ‘novels of ripening’ which depict later life, to counterbalance and compliment the representations of masculinity (Waxman 17).

This lack of representation is not solely a Northern Irish phenomenon. As Anne Wyatt-Brown remarks of Anglo-American fiction, “For many years novelists, poets and playwrights have hesitated to make older characters the central protagonists for fear that such works would not attract many readers” (9). Cultural representations of elderly people have been relegated to the margins, rendering them “culturally invisible” at best or portraying them as a homogenous, asexual, genderless group, often infantilised or otherwise stigmatised (Armengol 357). This ageist attitude is prevalent not only culturally but critically as Calasanti and King aphoristically remark, “Scholars tend to ignore age relations in part because of our own ageism. Most are not yet old, and even if we are, we often deny it” (20). This is changing however, as academic research into gendering gerontology is an emergent and increasingly popular field of academic



discourse. Within this field, however, masculinity theorists have observed that most of this research is centred on feminist discourse on the female body. There is evidence to substantiate this. For example, Judith Gardiner suggests that within cultural and critical scripts the “Male life cycle is privileged as normative and conceived of as unimpeded by the abrupt physical changes attributed to women” (99). This sweeping generalisation exemplifies how men are relegated to the fringes of gerontological research, as “if/when ageing men are studied at all in feminist scholarship, [they] have seldom been approached as a specific and equally complex gendered group” (Armengol 357). This critical oversight is reflected in the literature depicting masculinities, most often concerned with masculinities aged within the implicit remit of hegemonic masculinity, of the young to middle-aged. This chapter draws attention to the plurality and alterity within depictions of ageing masculinity in the post-conflict novel and how ageing masculinity in particular potentiates greater understanding and expression of multivalent masculinities.

Ageing, like gender, may be understood as both socially and biologically constructed. As Wernick and Featherstone explicate, “the ageing body is never just a body subjected to the imperatives of cellular and organic decline, for as it moves through life it is continually being inscribed and reinscribed with cultural meanings” (2). Furthermore, age, like gender, is also performative, displaying gendered denominations of what is socio-culturally deemed ‘age appropriate’ behaviour. As Gabriel Spector-Mersel articulates, “masculinities are bound to social clocks that ascribe different models of manhood to different periods of men’s lives” (70). However, as Spector-Mersel also notes, these models are truncated within the Western hegemonic script that “concludes at middle age” (68). Hegemonic masculinity is predicated not only upon the white, androcentric, middle class, but by emphasising physical agency and ability;

it is also essentially ageist. Thus, by concluding the hegemonic script at middle age, ‘older’ automatically becomes ‘other’. Age eclipses all other socio-cultural or biological determinants of identity. As Wilson observes “men and women are seen as old before they are characterised in any other way” (99). The effect of this kind of othering may contribute to the “monolithic image of the ageing male” as negative, defined by senescence, physical and mental decline and impotence (Armengol 358).

There is a heavily debated critical aporia within interdisciplinary studies of gender and gerontology between the competing theories of continuity versus discontinuity. The discontinuity model emphasises the disruptive impact of ageing, be it physical, psychological or socio-cultural, on the older man’s construction of masculine identity. Spector-Mersel describes this as an “internalisation of the interrupted masculine stories” (78). Conversely, the continuity perspective propounds that while ageing may necessitate some changes in masculine construction, it largely remains consistent, “According to the continuity models, becoming an older man might mean adapting to a new masculinity, but not one too different from the previous” (Thompson 16). It is important to note that these diametrically opposed perspectives represent extremes of what must be a spectrum of gendered attitudes towards ageing identity.

It is crucial for both a cultural and critical context to examine the rare, pluralised depictions of ageing male protagonists that destabilise this image. Within the gamut of post-conflict Northern Irish fiction only two authors have written narratives dedicated to ageing masculinity. Bernard MacLaverty and David Park are critically lauded veterans of Northern Irish fiction. Their long and successful careers, spanning from MacLaverty in 1977 and Park 1992 to the present, have been accompanied by their long-term marriages, and with both authors past pensionable age (MacLaverty is 75 and Park 65) it is perhaps inevitable that ageing men have

begun to feature prominently in their writing. As MacLaverty asserts in an interview for *The Guardian*, “You write from what you know, and one of the things is you are not telling your own story, but bits of it are your own story. It’s like a tessellation of a mosaic” (Stanford).

*Midwinter Break* is the first novel MacLaverty has published since the critically acclaimed *The Anatomy School* (2001). It depicts a septuagenarian couple, Stella and Gerry, married for over sixty years, who have come to a crossroads in their lives and are struggling to find identity and meaning in old age. However, as MacLaverty emphasises, “This is not a story about old people. It’s the story of two young people who got old and they have fallen out of step” (*Irish Times*). Their relationship is complicated by their shared trauma of the Troubles as Stella, while heavily pregnant, was shot in the abdomen. Although their child survived, the two were scarred forever by the event. The “bibulous” retired architect Gerry struggles with hiding his alcoholism, his only coping mechanism for dealing with the trauma, from his spiritually devout wife Stella. They struggle in their own individual ways to accept and assimilate the trauma of the past and adapt and construct a new, meaningful identity in their later years. Enright describes the novel as “a portrait of a marriage in its sixth decade that is unsparing and tender” (*Irish Times*). Indeed, it is a poignant and uniquely nuanced portrayal of the gendered subjectivities of the elderly and illustrates the divergent manner in which men and women experience and embody ageing.

Of Park’s post-conflict novels, it is within the political thriller *The Truth Commissioner* that one may discern a distinct focus on ageing masculinity. Based on a fictional investigation into the disappearance of fifteen-year-old Connor Walshe, murdered by the IRA for his involvement as an informant for the RUC, the novel features four main male protagonists and their relative responsibilities in the investigation into Connor’s death. The main characters who bear the most responsibility for his death are the two eldest protagonists, Francis Gilroy and

James Fenton. As ex-IRA Commander and ex-RUC Inspector respectively, while ideologically and ethno-politically disparate, the two embody ageing masculinities in direct counterpoint to one another. The multifaceted depictions of ageing men, struggling to maintain their masculine identity in the face of the physical and socio-cultural challenges presented by ageing, is of integral importance not only to literary discourse, but more broadly, the theoretical and sociological discourse of ageing and masculinity. Their ageing is also portrayed as problematised by their traumatic experience of the Troubles, in which both men played active and inarguably violent parts. Not only do these men represent the potential plurality of ageing male experience, but through their depiction Park suggests that their masculine ideologies are as aged and anachronistic as they are.

It is imperative to note, however, that while old age has othered and problematised these protagonists' constructions of male identity, as white, heterosexual and middle-class protagonists they remain largely within the hegemonic profile. As such these ageing men occupy an ambivalent, contradictory position, embodying the hegemonic while being undermined by it. While the remit of this thesis is to examine post-conflict Northern Irish literary representations of masculinity it is important to remain cognisant of the larger, global subordinated ageing masculinities that incorporate other masculinities, such as queer and multi-ethnic identities.

This chapter expounds upon the specific challenges ageing presents to the construction of masculine identity and the potential for literary representations of ageing masculinity to subvert and depolarise hierarchical hegemonic masculinity. It does so by engaging with and deconstructing David Park's and Bernard MacLaverty's various portrayals of ageing male protagonists. These representations of Northern Irish men, each with their own legacy of trauma due to the Troubles, are portrayed as embodying and reflecting different attitudes towards

establishing ageing, post-conflict masculinities. The chapter begins with an analysis of both the physical and socio-discursive embodiment of ageing masculinities, sexuality and intimacy in ageing heterosexual relationships before exploring the role of generativity and stagnancy in the construction of a meaningful ageing, post-conflict masculine identity.

### **1. Embodying Ageing Masculinities**

Masculinity theorist David Jackson emphasises the central role that bodies play in the discourse of ageing masculinity, be they literal and physical or socially discursive (11). That the body may be construed as a signifier for complex and diverse socio-political and historical meanings has been argued by many critics who concur that there has been an increasing “individualisation of the body, in which meanings are privatised and the body becomes a bearer of symbolic value” (Henwood et al. 40). This is especially significant for representations of masculinity in Northern Irish fiction as if the body is construed as “a socio-cultural and gender-specific discursive construct” as Caroline Magennis argues, it is possible to interpret men’s bodies as “sites of masculine crises” (£What Does Not Respect£ 89-107). Despite the obvious salience of physical ageing to the discourse on masculinity, Jackson notes that “the lived bodies of ageing men have been largely absent from the gerontological and sociological literature” (11). Thus, there is an opportunity to address this critical lacuna in academic discourse by exploring the representation of embodiment of ageing masculinities. *The Truth Commissioner* is a particularly appropriate resource, for as Stefanie Lehner asserts, “the novel foregrounds not only the vulnerability of the men but also the male body” (65).

Ex-IRA paramilitary Francis Gilroy is a man for whom the physical embodiment of hegemonic masculinity has been crucial to the construction of his militarised, hyper-masculine identity. He has been reliant upon physical strength and stamina to survive the adrenaline-fueled

“nights on the run, sleeping on floorboards, in damp roof spaces, the back of a car or any other temporary shelter” (*TTC* 79). Predicated upon a lifetime of “the constant strain of living on the edge of fear” (90) Gilroy’s physical situational awareness is “what makes him a survivor” (69). This dependency upon the physical hegemonic script renders Gilroy acutely aware of and profoundly affected by the bodily changes of ageing.

Gilroy’s dependence upon and identification with the physicality of hegemonic masculinity is emphasised when he first appears in the novel. Ruminating on the physical routines necessary for his very survival he remarks that the good habits, like those who practice them, “don’t die hard” (*TTC* 68). These ritualistic habits define his life, one he perceives as constantly under threat. Rising out of bed “he does not open the middle of the curtains but stands to one side and lightly lifts the cloth ... away from the sill” (*TTC* 68). He moves “to the other side of the window and views the opposite side of the street” to locate any potential threat, acknowledging that he has become “a creature shaped by the enforced habits of a lifetime’s struggle” (*TTC* 68, 69). Gilroy is aware that this behaviour is becoming increasingly viewed as anachronistic in a post-conflict Northern Ireland, and while he “struggles to make the youngsters understand – the need for vigilance, the constant need for caution ... the young ones snigger, puffed up on their own bravado and big talk” (69). The survival instincts and practices that kept Gilroy alive throughout the Troubles are, in times of peace, derided by the younger generation. This reflects attitudinal change in regards to violent masculinities in the contemporary cultural and socio-political sphere. As Ken Harland contends, “Violent behaviour once lauded and feted is now a source of general criticism” (747). Gilroy’s previously valorised aggressive masculinity is viewed as emasculating by the younger generation. This notion is also vividly underlined by Park’s depiction of the ageing Gilroy.

Gilroy's urgent concerns for physical survival, practiced with the authority of a militarised masculinity, is starkly contrasted against Park's portrayal of the character as he "sits on the edge of the bed and fumbles with his feet for his slippers" (*TTC* 69). Gilroy's survivalist anxieties are juxtaposed with the more immediate yet mundane concerns of ageing, such as the frequent and increasingly urgent need to urinate, "Drink anything at all – even a cup of tea – in the hours before sleep and it wants out again, whining away like a locked up puppy until its plea cannot be ignored" (*TTC* 69). The imagery of a whining puppy that cannot be ignored suggests the impecunious, infantilised and animalistic demands of an ageing body over which he has decreasing authority and control. The dichotomy experienced between mind and body is emphasised by the biologically detached statement that "His bladder feels as if it is about to give out. A sack with a hole" (*TTC* 69). It is evident that senescence is continually eroding Gilroy's embodiment of masculinity, his body rebelling with the "sudden twinge at the base of his spine as if it too is complaining about something" (*TTC* 69-70). Clearly, to Gilroy, the body is a locus of control and masculinity persistently undermined by the ageing process, as "Sometimes his whole body feels like a sullen malcontent casting up past failures or years of supposed neglect" (*TTC* 70). His increasingly fragile and vulnerable body is undermined as a site to enact masculinity. As he stands still and naked in the shower, he "cups his testicles gently and tries to find comfort in the warmth of the water" (*TTC* 79). These physical manifestations of ageing illustrate how "the inability to sustain hegemonic masculine ideals by keeping the body muscular, strong and resilient may threaten men's self-perceptions of their masculinity" (Evans et al. 12). While it is possible to accept and adapt to the new limitations that ageing imparts on the body, the concurrent loss of bodily autonomy that ageing precipitates increases Gilroy's sense of corporeal detachment. Ageing is perceived as a physical pathological attack over which

he has no control. For him, the body has become a traitorous ‘other’ a “body he no longer fully trusts” (*TTC* 79). Gilroy exemplifies the type of ageing man who having “taken for granted continuity of his embodied self was suddenly disrupted and the illusion of possessing a permanently strong and well-defended, body-self was invaded” (Jackson 50).

Gilroy’s displaced masculinity is physically and metaphorically embodied by his ageing decline into ill health. It is pertinent to note that while increased urination and erectile dysfunction (from which Gilroy also suffers) may be symptomatic of the normative ageing process, these are also indicators of prostate cancer. This serious and often terminal disease, frequently associated with the onset of age, and its possibility as causative of Gilroy’s symptomology, is a likelihood that has not escaped him. Several times in the novel he remarks that he “hopes it isn’t the old prostate” (*TTC* 75), yet it is clear from his numerous deflections that he has no intention of having this confirmed or treated. Ageing and a decline in health pose significant problems for masculinity, further compounding issues of vulnerability and weakness. It has been noted that health, like ageing, “seems to be one of the most clear-cut areas in which the damaging impacts of traditional masculinity are evident” (Sabo and Gordon 17). This is especially relevant in the presentation of prostate problems. Given its location in the body an attack on the genital area represents an attack on one’s phallocentric construction of masculinity. Indeed, even the rectal examination necessary to diagnose prostate cancer is associated with emasculation as digital rectal penetration has homosexual connotations. As Evans et al note in their qualitative research, many men “avoided digital rectal exams for prostate cancer screening because of the association between the penetration of men’s bodies, homosexuality and compromised masculinity” (22). Gilroy attempts to jokingly deflect these associations remarking that he hopes “they take off their rings first” (*TTC* 83). It is clear that for Gilroy, and many other



men, the possibility of prostate cancer represents a uniquely male threat to the construction of gendered identity.

The hormonal imbalances associated with ageing further serve to effeminise Gilroy's body, which in turn undermines his embodiment of masculinity. Betty Friedan notes that many ageing men face "diminished masculinity" and effectively feel feminised by their growing weakness and vulnerability (356). Gilroy's equation of physical ageing with effeminisation recurs throughout the novel. Aware of his nakedness, he tells his wife accusatorily, "You're right, I am turning into an old woman" (*TTC* 83). As he surveys his naked body in the mirror "it strikes him that his body is beginning to turn into an old woman's with its incipient breasts and protruding little pot of a belly" (*TTC* 80). He considers the ageing process itself as feminine and feminising, remarking that, "Something is happening to him. Maybe it's the menopause because he has read that it happens to men as well" (*TTC* 82). Gilroy's thinking reflects the traditional hierarchical paradigm of masculinity which, truncated at middle age, renders anything older as other and anything non-masculine as feminine.

The visible othering of the ageing body has socio-cultural dimensions that further exacerbate feelings of a lack of autonomy. While indubitably altruistically motivated, other members of society feel at liberty to opine and interject upon the ageing body in a manner that social convention precludes for younger bodies. This is illustrated in the novel by the comments many of Gilroy's junior colleagues make about the older man's body and health while simultaneously demonstrating double standards. While his younger colleagues indulge with impunity in a fat-filled Ulster Fry for breakfast and burgers for lunch, they admonish Gilroy for similarly partaking, "Franky, do you think that sort of start to a day is good for your cholesterol? Clogs up the old arteries" (*TTC* 76) and "What about the cholesterol then? Clog your arteries that

will” (*TTC* 95). Gilroy repeatedly declines his colleagues’ continual offers to make appointments with the doctor, hospital or optician or to organise a restful holiday or break. Resentful of the implication that he is old or weak, he remarks, “They’ll think I’m not up to it, think I’m too old. They’re like a bunch of vultures waiting for the first sign of weakness” (96). Like many men, he refuses help in the face of his own limitations, fearing being seen as emasculated or weak despite needing help.

Moreover, in a political context the ageing male body, as Featherstone and Wernick explain, “may be a walking memory” (110), a locus of and site upon which “the effects of the passing of time are literally inscribed into their surfaces and performances” (111). For Gilroy, lack of autonomy over his own increasingly effeminate body presents a particularly problematic identification with ageing as “The fear of loss of power and the shame of dependence are closely linked to the importance of self-possession” (Featherstone and Wernick 97). His physical pain evokes traumatic memories that incorporate specific challenges to the construction of a subaltern, post-colonial masculinity. The pain of his vulnerable, fragile body dredges up memories of subjugation that continue to problematise Gilroy’s embodiment of masculinity as “He thinks, too, of the squeaking, brightly polished tow-capped boots of the squaddies as they give him a leathering ... a disorientating geography of pain” (*TTC* 79). In such a way Gilroy’s body “embodies collective memories” (Featherstone & Wernick 110), particularly when the body is a locus of political activity through passive resistance. In Gilroy’s case, this was the dirty protest of the 1970’s wherein nationalist prisoners in the Maze prison refused to clean or leave their cells in a protest to obtain political prisoner status. In the shower, Gilroy “thinks of Ricky and himself on the blanket in a shit-smear cell and the moment when the warders used hoses to wash them down” (*TTC* 79). Caroline Magennis notes, “As a signifier the male body is hugely

potent as it embodies both agency and victimhood and allows a more complicated identification with the nation-state” (“Borders” 91).

Gilroy and the patriarchal masculinity he embodies are depicted as decaying, dying out. His senescence is an external manifestation of his internally fractured and disintegrating masculine identity. He clearly emblematises men for whom physical ageing disrupts “the everyday illusion of his bodily stability, solidity and coherence, as well as the protected integrity of his embodied selves suddenly collapse” (Jackson 51). The depiction of ex-paramilitary Gilroy’s physical decrepitude is emblematic of how, as Magennis asserts, “The male body in a state of degeneration and incontinence has a radical power to unsettle, and this power is magnified by discourses of hegemonic masculinity in Northern Ireland” (“Borders” 91). Irrevocably caught within the violent and aggressive masculine narrative of the Troubles, Gilroy’s association with the outmoded aspects of hegemonic masculinity and his inability to reconstruct a new more positive modality of ageing masculinity have led to his downfall.

Retired RUC Inspector James Fenton is, in many ways, presented as a direct counterpoint to Francis Gilroy. The differences between them are emphasised by their many parallels. While representing opposite sides of the ethno-political divide, both ageing men derive their masculine identity from the traditional physical precepts of hegemonic masculinity. Both previously occupied positions of power in heavily militarised organisations, from which both have been ‘decommissioned’ and supplanted by a younger generation of men. Gilroy, however, represents the discontinuous model of masculinity that emphasises the “disorientating shocks of physical disruptions and discontinuities in ageing men’s experiences” (Jackson 54). Conversely, Fenton’s physical ageing is more representative of the ‘continuous model’ of ageing masculinity, often co-opted into the consumerist ‘positive ageing’ discourse that stresses the persistent experience of

masculinity based on “an heroic image of agelessness” (Jackson 45). Theorist David Jackson, however, criticises this model of ageing masculinity, arguing that it is contingent upon “fantasies of prolonging youth and mid-life lifestyles” (45). By analysing the character of James Fenton, the limitations of such a narrative to the construction of ageing masculinity become readily apparent.

The Royal Ulster Constabulary was a heavily militarised police force operating in the province from 1922 until its reformation into the Police Service of Northern Ireland in 2001. Authorised to use ‘heavy force’, including rubber bullets, Anna Coote argues that for the RUC “militarism and the masculinity of the force have, in the past, gone hand in hand” (54). The RUC has been a highly controversial organisation. Predominantly constituted of male, Protestant and Unionist members, it has been disparaged over the years as having been a prejudiced and sectarian force. Frequently accused of and condemned for corruption, collusion and sectarian violence and murder (Bowcott 207) the RUC in many ways parallels the aggression and violence associated with paramilitary organisations such as the IRA. Both James Fenton, as ex-RUC Inspector, and Francis Gilroy, as ex-IRA Commander, occupied positions of power and authority in aggressive, military organisations wherein hegemonic masculinity was the norm and physical fitness necessary for survival. Like Gilroy, Fenton has also lived a life under constant threat of danger during the Troubles. As he states, “I’ve had a lifetime of being threatened by thugs, of looking under my car every day” (*TTC* 135). Fenton too feels his rightful place has been usurped by a younger generation of men who have neither earned their position as men nor respect the value of his experiences and sacrifices. Fenton’s previous position has been usurped by Alec, a “young man, who has now acquired his post with a fraction of the experience” (*TTC* 126). Just as Gilroy and his entourage declaim that “There’s no respect for the past anymore” (*TTC* 95) so too

does Fenton assert that the younger generation “have no knowledge of the service he has given or the reputation he has” (*TTC* 312). Considering the gun as an obvious metaphor for the phallus and masculinity, for Gilroy and Fenton, giving up their guns is emasculating both figuratively and metaphorically, especially in a society which had previously venerated violence.

The peace process has dissolved these respective bastions of militaristic hypermasculinity and the iterations of violent masculinity they espoused are rendered redundant at best, shameful at worst. As his new successor Alec is quick to point out, the old way of policing is no longer valid or accepted, “It’s different from what you knew. Everything’s different now, James” (*TTC* 286). Like Gilroy, the actions Fenton has taken in the past, just as the hegemonic masculinity he embodies, have become anachronistic in a post-conflict Northern Ireland, and function “as an embarrassment to those still serving, part of their past they want to shed like some mottled skin” (*TTC* 355). Ageing in both these protagonists serves as an extended metaphor for the rejection of ‘traditional’ masculinity necessitated by the peace process and the congruent vacuum into which we must posit alternative understandings and expressions of masculinities.

Forced into retirement, Fenton, like many retiring men within Northern Ireland and beyond, is forced to seek alternative outlets to express his masculinity. It is evident from the outset that Fenton prides himself on his physical strength, autonomy and agency, since retirement becoming particularly focused on physically demanding mountain walking. Bolstering his masculine identity he considers climbing the “North’s highest mountain” as no more than a “slightly arduous walk” (*TTC* 124). Fenton utilises physical exertion to differentiate himself from the younger Alec (who has now taken his former place in the police force) who accompanies him on one of his climbs, “He smiles as he thinks of how he will make this young man, who has now acquired his former post on a fraction of the experience, climb a mountain

before he's given the chance to reveal the reason for his presence" (*TTC* 126). Fenton, despite his age, is more physically fit than the young man who has usurped his old position, lording his masculine prowess over the young man who slumps "obviously desperate for rest as his breathing breaks in shallow rasps" (*TTC* 129). This is indicative of an outlook that is predicated upon, as Jackson puts it, "heroic, self-aggrandising, embodied, masculine selves [that] have been constructed through a systematic othering and expulsion of what he fears most – physical inadequacy, disability and loss of a fiercely competitive, bodily mastery and control" (Jackson 49).

Fenton's lifestyle is congruent with a new, positive cultural narrative that rejects the limitations of ageing. This narrative suggests that one may continue, as if in a prolonged mid-life, enjoying the physical activities indulged in previously. As Jackson iterates, "Such a culture offers new, constructive emphases on physical activity, leisure sports in order to promote satisfaction and health" (*TTC* 45). Not content with merely being active, Fenton plans to fill his retirement years pushing himself physically, building "up his stamina and experience, getting into the mountains as much as he can" (*TTC* 174). This notion of an ageing man "pushing himself to his limits" (Jackson 47) can be terribly problematic; rather than inspiring men to simply be healthy it can cause them to ignore the physical limitations of ageing. This type of risk-taking behaviour reinforces the hegemonic paradigm of masculinity in a manner that may result in "an over-valuing of autonomy and independence" (Jackson 47). Fenton too privileges his autonomy and independence, preferring "to walk alone, finding pleasure in the solitude" (*TTC* 124). However, on one climb he "had fallen on his back banging his head against the stone" (*TTC* 125), resulting in painful injury. Walking up mountains alone presents risks; risks Fenton indulges in by ignoring the physical limitations placed upon him by ageing. Furthermore,

there is a sense that, subconsciously at least, Fenton indulges in this risky behaviour to recapture the adrenaline-fueled experiences of his time in the RUC. His wife Miriam scolds him for his recklessness, telling him that she “didn’t survive thirty years of being a policeman’s wife only to be widowed by a mountain” (*TTC* 126). While Fenton has tried the safer situation of walking with other retired police officers, “he hadn’t enjoyed it. There was something too forced in the nostalgia, the constant banter deprived of his context seemed, to him at least, to be meaningless” (*TTC* 126). In their company Fenton is hyper-conscious of the advances of age. What was relevant in their prime is out of place in old age: “He has affection and respect for them but the past is the past and he feels a need to strike out alone at this new stage in his life” (*TTC* 126). Fenton exemplifies that type of man who, Jackson argues, “instead of learning to recognise the social importance of mutual interdependence becomes extremely self-reliant and without friends” (*TTC* 47).

Another pertinent element in this self-imposed isolation is Fenton’s association with the trauma of his time in the RUC. It is a past life that continues to haunt him and which he’d hoped with age he would be able to put behind him (*TTC* 134). As such, by avoiding his previous colleagues Fenton may be defending himself from anxieties about ageing and the pain and hurt associated with past traumas (Jackson 49). It is as if, as Jackson articulates, Fenton has “built a self-protective myth of independence and self-sufficiency around himself and, in doing so, has possibly attempted to conquer his pain through the construction of a heroic ... embodied self” (49).

This, however, only contributes to Fenton’s increasing sense of disillusionment and combines with his realisation that far from a hero he was actually a villain. Unable to negotiate a positive, generative ageing identity Fenton surrenders to a process of self-dissolution. Park

depicts him finally, among the mountains contemplating suicide, the physical abnegation of the self.

David Park's ageing protagonists in many ways represent the disparate "polarity between the 'agelessness' of 'positive ageing' and the bleak equation between old age and bodily decline" (Jackson 49). Their decline in the novel highlights the "awareness that masculine myths of self-sufficiency and a tendency to force yourself beyond your bodily capacity need to be broken and reconstructed" (Jackson 43). It is crucial to note, however, that these positions represent poles on a spectrum of ageing and it is within the spectrum that a more holistic representation of masculinity may be found. Jackson puts forward that it is possible to "explore an alternative suggestion of a different kind of discourse built upon the idea of creative discontinuity and radical disruption in the lives of some ageing men" (Jackson 50). Such a discourse would reflect the realities and discontinuities of physical ageing without pathologising the ageing process. Concomitantly, this would embrace an alternative discourse of "social masculinity and communal well-being and interdependence" (Jackson 50). Bernard MacLaverty's protagonist Gerry in *Midwinter Break* is a noteworthy example.

The longevity of Gerry and Stella's marriage and the novel's portrayal of different gendered attitudes towards embodying ageing allow for a more understanding and interdependent relationship. Cameron and Bernandes' analysis of gender roles with regard to health is particularly illuminating in this regard. They write that, "Women ...make more use of health care services and are regarded generally as the custodians of health for their partners and families as well as themselves" (674). While Stella is described as "pale and exhausted", worn out, it is intimated, by a lifetime of taking care of others rather than herself, her self-care and awareness of her limitations reflects that she is the more physically and emotionally sturdy of the



two. Stella's adaptability to old age has positive ramifications for Gerry. He is more prone to take care of himself physically due to Stella's positive feminine influence, "He didn't want to show he was inadequate when on his own so he tied his navy scarf around his neck and put on his hat and coat" (*Midwinter Break* 59). Gerry, for his part, is considerate of his wife's concerns, holding her hand and escorting her across the street. Her "hand eye coordination was a lot poorer than his, so generally he travelled behind her in case she stumbled. If they were descending he'd go in front" (*Midwinter Break* 192). This interdependency in the relationship liberates ageing masculinity from the usual negative connotations associated with dependency.

Symptoms of senescence and the physical body play an integral and complex role in the lives and identities of both aged protagonists. Gerry's attitude is one of angst, whereas Stella's is more accepting. Gerry regularly scrutinises his reflection for the tell-tale signs of ageing with an almost medical dispassion, triaging the encroaching aetiology of age with the assured authority of the chronic hypochondriac. His diagnosis of morbidity is affirmed with even the most minor physical changes, from "developing a dewlap – a definite dewlap" (*Midwinter Break* 36) to his diagnosis of "sub-watch hirsutism. With concomitant angst" (*Midwinter Break* 9). Gerry is alert to the incremental manifestations of age, however his predilection towards hypochondria is held in check by his wife. Stella has a more positive outlook, noting that for all their ailments the two are physically mobile, "We're not that bad yet, thought Stella, we can still self-propel – get about on our own two pegs" (*Midwinter Break* 199). Furthermore, the relationship ensures that Gerry does not abandon self-care in his presentation. As Stella takes pride in herself, her "wee bit of makeup" and her hair mousse with "volumising hold" (*Midwinter Break* 200), so too does Gerry. Armed with his "Rolls-Royce conditioner" he is similarly conscientious of his appearance, with

considerate input from his wife to carefully maintain an appearance “Midway between flamboyant and dreary” (*Midwinter Break* 10).

While they both experience and articulate their various ailments, Stella prevents Gerry from developing a morbid obsession with decline by abbreviating their discussion to Ailment Hour, “Stella’s idea to allot no more than sixty minutes a day to their various illnesses” (*Midwinter Break* 59). This allows for open expression and discussion of the physical signs of decline, but also strictly limits this expression so that it does not define the ageing narrative. It is illustrative of a more progressive attitude towards ageing that incorporates both the negative, discontinuous interruption to gendered ageing but also allows for a “mature acknowledgement of the (limitations of the) physical realities of ageing” (Jackson 43).

Both protagonists are depicted as having issues with their eyes that, while rooted in the physical, are also deeply metaphorical. Deteriorating eyesight is perhaps the first and most common symptom of ageing, ubiquitously used allegorically to denote advancing age. While the mere suggestion of visiting an optician threatens Francis Gilroy’s precarious construction of masculinity in *The Truth Commissioner*, for Gerry the routine of such visits, while depicted as normative, are no less imbued with meaning. The closeness of the optician makes Gerry feel vulnerable and uncomfortable; he fears that she will “smell his old man’s breath” (*Midwinter Break* 7). Shrouded in darkness in the confines of the office, with the intimate proximity of the optician, the room takes on the dimensions of the confessional box. He imagines her asking “How long has it been since your last eye appointment my child? Alone or with others? Better or worse?” (*Midwinter Break* 7). The comparison here is adroit, suggesting that for Gerry, the admission of ageing is inherently personal and somehow shameful. This also relates to the socio-

cultural bias of the ‘sin’ of ageing. Ageing, like masturbation (to which the “Alone or with others” is in reference), while natural, is also viewed as a mortal sin.

Gerry’s eye problems are not confined to the common age-related macular degeneration. Indeed, his eyes are the focus of his most intense hypochondriacal obsession. The experience of occasional flashes and striations of light in one’s eyesight is fairly common; however it arouses in Gerry a fear of the increasingly imminent onset of stroke, “Spiders of light, sparks, flashes. A prelude to a stroke ...” (*Midwinter Break* 6) or “Marcasite jabs and darts. An imminent stroke – probably before he reached the bathroom” (*Midwinter Break* 37). Gerry’s optician perfunctorily dismisses his concerns, stating simply that “everybody gets them at your age, she said. It’s when you stand too quickly” (*Midwinter Break* 7). This is on one level a reminder that as one ages any physical changes are often, and potentially unfairly, relegated to the rigors of age, denying physical agency and autonomy to the elderly. In Gerry’s case, however, it could be that by focusing on the devastating possibility of stroke he is simultaneously ignoring the more probable cause, that of his drinking. Often in the novel, despite Gerry’s own clinical observation of his physical changes, he appears to unconsciously attribute signs of excess drinking to the process of ageing. The drinking, like ageing, is “labelling his face ... to show the subsidence, the undermining” (*Midwinter Break* 36). The physical signs of ageing are inextricably linked to drinking as these physical symptoms take “years, decades” to manifest, “The owl habits sculpting away at the finished you” (*Midwinter Break* 36).

There is a similar conflation of ageing and alcoholism later in the novel, as Gerry is depicted falling in the shower. Having been drinking all day, and aware to some extent of his physical limitation, he “Gingerly stepped into the bath, holding onto the metal handles” (*Midwinter Break* 97). Even as he slips Gerry is concerned with the physical fragility of his

ageing body, “how many promontories, bones ends, cartilaginous dislocations will be broken, damaged, bounced off hard enamel” (*Midwinter Break* 98). His fall is depicted as a traumatic, violent experience, “Vivid in the mind as a road crash” (*Midwinter Break* 98). Gerry is left emasculated, physically and emotionally exposed and vulnerable on the floor of the bath, “water hissing onto his feet, his jaw throbbing, his knees and thighs reddening. His cock askew at ten past two” (*Midwinter Break* 98). Again, Gerry is loath to attribute this fall to his drinking, instead attributing the incident to ageing and the blame to the hotel: “Every bath should have a mat. For the elderly” (*Midwinter Break* 99), to which Stella replies “But you deny you’re elderly” (*Midwinter Break* 99). Nonetheless, Gerry ruminates on the fall and his incipient mortality, investing the event with additional meaning, “it’s a crucial event. The first time you fall in the shower ... the next header is into the grave” (*Midwinter Break* 100).

Stella has her own problems. Her eyes have become increasingly dry with age: she has difficulty producing tears and is reliant upon eye drops and artificial tears. While this is again a normative part of the ageing process, in the novel it becomes invested with symbolic significance. In addition to his myopia, Gerry notes that, if anything, he produces too many tears; the wind itself brings tears to his eyes to the point that he must “mop his eyes with a hanky before he could see again. Unlike Stella whose problem was no tears at all” (*Midwinter Break* 3). Gerry is portrayed as deeply traumatised in the novel. He is overwhelmed by emotions and memories of the past with which he has been trying to cope by drinking alcohol. If Gerry is too prone to emotion, signified by crying too much, then to him Stella is the opposite. She is seemingly unburdened by such emotions and he wonders, “Did her eye condition prevent her from weeping? Was she beyond actual tears?” (*Midwinter Break* 112). For her part Stella retorts, “There’s no lack of tears. God knows. It’s just that they’re of such poor quality” (*Midwinter*

*Break* 112). This is beyond Gerry's understanding as he questions, "Poor quality tears ...?" (*Midwinter Break* 112). This reflects the chasm of disconnect between the two, showing that Gerry is unaware of the depth of Stella's true emotions. Stella does weep for the death of her dream, her relationship with Gerry and his alcohol abuse, her "inferior tears" spilling down her cheeks (*Midwinter Break* 199). The idea that her tears are weak connotes not that she is incapable of emotion, but that her tears are too weak to express the depths of her emotion.

Another physical symptom of senescence made mention of in the novel is the elasticity of ageing skin and its impressionability. Gerry remarks upon his oedematous ankles after a day of walking, appropriately referring to the painful impression left by his socks on his skin, as "Guinness rings" (*Midwinter Break* 91), to which Stella replies, "Don't blame the socks – it's you. Your skin's gone spongiform – you poor thing" (*Midwinter Break* 92). Stella continues, "Still on the elasticity of skin, look at the depression your watch leaves" (*Midwinter Break* 92). In the bath, Stella notes the impressions left by clothing on her own skin, "Her stomach still bearing the track of her pants. Elastic and skin like tongue and groove" (*Midwinter Break* 30). This comment on the ease with which external influences apply pressure and mark their bodies may be seen as a metaphor for the impact that life's traumas have had on both their identities. This is particularly appropriate for Stella, who equates the scars on her body with life and death, birth and spirituality. While in the bath, Stella observes the impression on her skin next to "the scar near her navel. Above the pale line of her C-section" (*Midwinter Break* 30). The scar marks the trauma of the bullet that entered her when she was shot while heavily pregnant with her only child Michael, a wound that rendered her infertile. This same wound necessitated birth by caesarean section, a birth over which she had no control or autonomy as she was unconscious from the severity of her own wound. This lack of autonomy over her own body when giving

birth represents a deeply personal and gendered trauma for Stella. By chance Stella comes upon an exhibition displaying excerpts from William Hunter's "*The anatomy of the human gravid uterus exhibited in figures*" (1774), by which she is immediately repulsed. The majority of these anatomical drawings graphically depict the womb and vagina, cut off from the rest of the body. It is as if, biologically speaking, these are the only important areas of a woman's body. Depicting them as devoid of the woman to whom they belong dehumanises the woman. Stella is disgusted by these very connotations, "What Stella couldn't forgive, was the reduction of the poor woman's legs to gigot chops with the bone in" (*Midwinter Break* 141). Stella notes that within the text, "The artist got a mention, the collector and anatomist got a mention, but there was nothing about the woman" (*Midwinter Break* 141). MacLaverty exemplifies the privileging of male authority and control of the female body, and foregrounds Stella's own lack of agency in her birthing experience. For Stella – "marked fore and aft" – her ageing body is literally inscribed with memories integral to her gendered identity. Gerry too has been similarly marked, becoming reliant on alcohol to drown out the recurring traumatic memories of Stella's shooting. His many bruises, broken veins, rosacea and other maladies are also physical manifestations of repressed trauma, as alcoholism is his only coping mechanism for dealing with pain.

By the end of the novel, Gerry's physical wounds are visibly beginning to heal, just as Gerry himself may heal from trauma and potentially his alcoholism. Aware of the interdependent nature of his experience and his drinking, Gerry is willing to accept the limitations of his ageing and forego alcohol, in no small way due to Stella's ameliorative influence. The positive influence of this long-term relationship enables Gerry to learn "to tolerate and embrace his vulnerable, embodied selves as an integral part of [discovering how] 'to live life in a different way'" (Jackson 52).

## 2. Ageing Masculinity: Sexuality and Intimacy

Equally pertinent to the discussion on ageing masculine bodies is the intersectional impact of sexuality on ageing masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is intrinsically phallocentric, as David Leverenz notes that “Across cultures and centuries, the erect penis has been the most basic synecdoche for a man’s virility and force” (63). Thus, the impact of ageing and senescence on sexuality as concomitant with impotence presents a specific challenge to the construction of masculinity. Ageing can problematise the age-old masculine metonym. As Sandberg notes, “Experiences of impotence are hence commonly understood as a potential loss, and as a threat to masculinity” (270). Given the congruence of hegemonic masculinity to heterosexual, penetrative sex, male ageing is often posited as “the opposite of virility, with diminished sexual prowess inevitably leading to the loss of manhood and feminisation” (Armengol 357). To many men the impotence associated with age represents a “man’s most ego breaking betrayal” (Leverenz 67).

The natural libidinous decline associated with ageing masculinity has become pathologised by contemporary society, facilitating the promotion of the multi-million-dollar sexopharmaceutical industry’s ‘cure’, Viagra. This in itself has problematic ramifications for masculinity as not only does it reinforce the pathologisation and discontinuity of ageing masculinity, which therefore must be ‘treated’, but it also reiterates the phallocentric sexual ideal of youth espoused by hegemonic masculinity. As Sandberg argues “Viagra can be understood as a gendered technology that functions to reconstruct male bodies along the lines of normalcy and reinstates the erection as central to male bodies and sexualities” (264). Furthermore, cultural representations of the ageing, actively sexual male are rare and where extant portrayed as heavily stigmatised, often stereotypically reflecting the narrative of the “dirty old man who is inappropriately sexual” (Sandberg 263). The binarised representations of ageing masculinity as

either impotent and effeminised or inappropriately sexual ignores the wide spectrum of plural and potentially positive ageing male sexualities. Linn Sandberg, for example, posits that the changes and adaptations necessitated by the ageing male body may serve as radical discursive sites of benefit to alternative constructions of masculinity. With ageing, the decentralised focus on erectile and penetrative sexuality can liberate the male to experience sexuality differently, with a heightened emphasis on intimacy. She argues that intimacy may in fact “be enabled by the ageing body, and may in turn produce other sexual subjectivities among men as they age” (263). This allows for a plurality of heterosexual expressions and masculine constructions that may directly counter the stereotype of the ‘dirty old man’ and instead contribute toward shaping an alternative, “respectable heterosexual subjectivity” (263). Sandberg argues that “intimacy is part of a wider construction of heterosexuality, masculinity and later-life sexuality, though not in any univocal way” (262). The protagonists of *The Truth Commissioner* and *Midwinter Break* are of central importance to a discussion of ageing male sexuality as they represent multivalent sites within a spectrum, “challenging the conventional equation of men’s ageing processes with (sexual) decline, exemplifying their plurality as well as irreducible contradictions” (Armengol 355).

As iterated, Francis Gilroy is depicted as the physical and metaphorical embodiment of an ageing and outmoded masculinity. Gilroy’s ageing is thus deliberately portrayed as pathological, his physical and mental decline eroding his hegemonic construction of masculinity. He is worn out and exhausted after the ordeal of his daughter’s wedding, so his colleague encourages him to take a holiday to “Put a bit of lead in the pencil”, a telling and rather ironic idiomatic reference (*TTC* 263). Gilroy is already conscious that the intimate nature of his relationship with his wife has maternal features, which in turn make him feel patronised and



emasculated. On holiday, Gilroy and his wife “huddle together like lovers” in the wind, “But in bed they aren’t lovers” (*TTC* 265, 266). Gilroy’s attempts at lovemaking exemplify the frustrations of ageing male sexuality, “He tries twice but each time it fades like the afternoon light, collapsing into nothing, and even though he refuses to accept it’s happening and tries to fire himself into passion there’s only the spent rush of his breathing” (*TTC* 266). His wife tries to reassure him, asserting that he is only tired, that it doesn’t matter, “But it matters to him and after the second time he stands at the window and looks out at the opaque band of grey” (*TTC* 266). That he is let down not only once but twice underlines the gravity of “sexual impotence being repeatedly depicted as itself a metaphor for diminished manhood and virility” (Armengol 358). Gilroy’s inability to perform sexually as per the hegemonic script has a calamitous effect on his construction of masculinity, his impotence the last of a series of successive senescent, bodily betrayals. Gilroy is emblematic of the many men, Leverenz argues, “who cannot escape their narcissistic enslavement to their penis synecdoche” (68). No longer the ‘hard man’ of his youth, Gilroy resents having given up the gun, and feels he has been decommissioned in every way possible. Unable to construct an alternative, ageing masculinity, he is depicted at the end of the novel “as impotent and exhausted, knowing that he has approached the end of his ministerial career (Lehner 74).

While Gilroy bemoans that his conjugal bed is “Cold with me in it” (*TTC* 266), Fenton urges his wife Miriam into bed hurriedly, “Please, Miriam, just leave everything. Before what heat there is gets out” (*TTC* 282). There is perhaps a sense of double entendre to his words, as Fenton’s bed, unlike Gilroy’s, has the warmth of intimacy and sexuality, “They feel like lovers” (*TTC* 282). Their intimacy is soft and explorative, lacking the urgent demand for penetrative sex, and Fenton instead “touches her hair, kisses her carefully and without presumption” (*TTC* 282).

The two talk and hold each other, which Leverenz argues is a typically relaxed and intimate experience for older couples for whom, “in bed and during the day, talking and touching weave together” (66).

For Fenton, unlike Gilroy, there is no pressure to perform. As Leverenz remarks, “sexual intimacy flourishes when performance anxiety subsides” (66). Fenton finds comfort in the intimacy as “He kisses her again and she relaxes in his arms and closes her eyes and he knows the joy of being truly home and safe in the certainties that it brings and also a fool for all the thoughts of journeys and distant places” (*TTC* 282). This kind of portrayal of ageing intimacy is rare in the literary world. For instance, as Lynne Segal writes of Philip Roth’s many ageing male protagonists, “a man’s ageing desire is never able for long to eroticise the comforting familiarity of a longtime companion” (85). For Fenton sexual intimacy is the very locus of his love and desire, “He tries to tell her that he loves her but the words slip away and instead he touches her with tenderness as if she is a young girl again” (*TTC* 282-283). Park’s depiction illustrates how intimacy acts as a gestalt, “not only understood as an emotion, but as an assemblage combining a wide range of issues, from touch and sensuality, disclosure, to feelings of love and commitment” (Sandberg 262). Leverenz affirms that the intimacy of “cuddling and caressing ... can express love much more richly than a younger man’s push to climax” (66). Fenton relishes the intimacy and familiarity of their long marriage, “They’ve never known anyone other than each other and been together such a long time that perhaps it shouldn’t have come as a surprise that there’ve been periods when they’ve been lost to each other” (*TTC* 283).

Their ‘coming together’ is heavily insinuated in the novel but not explicitly depicted. Instead it is alluded to by their later reactions as Fenton goes to leave and Miriam asks smiling “And will it be a repeat of coming back?” to which “He blushes and looks at her smiling like a

girl and then she too colours a little and turns away to the sink" (*TTC* 285). It is important to note that Park purposefully emphasises and delineates the intimacy of sexuality rather than the coitus itself. By so doing his writing reflects the lived heterosexual experience of many ageing men for whom, as research has shown, intimacy is more enjoyable (and perhaps more feasible) than the act of penetrative sex. Leverenz articulates that, decentralised from the phallic, penetrative imperative, "Arousal feels more continuous. Whole bodies cleave together and play from mouths to toes, mutually enveloping, alive to our sensations, without the reductive push for genital satisfaction" (66). It is almost as if ageing facilitates, with less phallic orientation, men to enjoy a similar experience of sexual arousal to women. As Sandberg suggests, intimacy potentially "shapes the male body into a body that is less phallic and more sexually ambiguous and indiscernible" (277). Considering that Park as an author has previously iterated explicit scenes of sexuality in *Swallowing the Sun* and *The Light of Amsterdam* for example, his exception in this case is certainly deliberate. By not specifying their experience as coital, penetrative sex, Park highlights the ambiguity and plurality of potential sexual experiences. This reflects Sandberg's suggestion that "linking intimacy in later life with freedom creates positive associations to later life sexuality, where the definitions of what counts as sex or sexuality is widened and redefined" (269). Far from the representation of ageing male heterosexuality as impotent like Gilroy, or stigmatised like the cultural trope of the dirty old man, Fenton's intimate relationship allows for a more generative expression of sexuality. This proves that ageing can provide an alternative narrative of masculine construction differentiated from the phallocentric ideal of hegemonic masculinity.

For Gerry, intimacy is an integral part of his long-term relationship, both in and out of bed. He is physically and emotionally demonstrative of his regard for Stella, to whom he is

devoted. Intimacy permeates nearly all his (non-alcoholic) actions, even crossing the road is invested with sentiment. Taking his wife's hand not only to direct her through the traffic, "Gerry thought of the hand holding as an intimacy – different to 'hooking on'. It was skin to skin. The snugness of the fit. The hands made for each other" (*Midwinter Break* 26). The two are emotionally demonstrative, stealing kisses as "The lift door shut, and, being alone, they kissed" (*Midwinter Break* 101). Intimacy has been a mainstay of their long relationship, particularly for Gerry, who relates a memory of accidentally seeing Stella on a day they spent apart, "He was elated and stood there blushing because he felt such elation. It was like the first time they'd met. And yet they'd been married about twenty years!" (*Midwinter Break* 64). MacLaverty's portrayal deviates from the traditional narrative of men fearing intimacy as Gerry relishes the intimacy in his relationship. This in itself is subversive of what Sandberg refers to as "the popular discourses on men as 'fearing intimacy'" which she criticises as a prejudice based on "anecdotal rather than empirical evidence" (263).

On visiting the Rijksmuseum the two become absorbed by Rembrandt's portrait, *The Jewish Bride*. MacLaverty describes the portrait as "Two figures, a man and a woman on the edge of intimacy, or perhaps just after, about to coorie [cuddle] into each other" (*Midwinter Break* 85). To Gerry and Stella the painting serves less as a portrait and more as a mirror, reflecting back their own image, as Stella adroitly notes of the male subject, but it is equally applicable to Gerry, in that "There's a great tenderness in him... You can see he cherishes her" (*Midwinter Break* 85). She points out how the subject is resting his hand on the female's breast "She's allowing him to have her hand there ... It's the subject of the painting – the woman's permission – and it's in the hands" (*Midwinter Break* 85). The feelings of sexual intimacy aroused by the portrait are alluded to shortly thereafter in the novel. In a prelude to making love,

“Gerry held up his hands as if he didn’t know what to do with them. He reached out and touched her. Like the husband in *The Jewish Bride*” (*Midwinter Break* 92). Gerry’s position reflects Rembrandt’s male subject, almost asking for permission to touch Stella, which he does gently and sensuously. Like Fenton and his wife Miriam, Stella and Gerry enjoy the intimacy of holding each other in bed and talking, both as a prelude to and post making love. That the two have an active and intimate sex life is subversive to the dominant socio-cultural expectation that people in their seventies are considered impotent and sexless, as such a sexual relationship at this stage in life is seldom portrayed.

Like Park, MacLavery does not go into details, remarking simply and succinctly that “They made love” (*Midwinter Break* 92). Again, this allows for a certain amount of ambiguity as to the nature of their sexual relations, although there is a definite intimation that it was both penetrative and orgasmic. MacLavery’s depiction adroitly reflects some of the particularly male concerns posed by ageing sexuality, as he nervously asks his wife “What’ll happen when ... this stops?” (*Midwinter Break* 93). Stella however displays no such anxiety, smiling and replying simply that “there’ll be no more” (*Midwinter Break* 94). This, however, poses a serious threat to Gerry who sardonically complains that “a sneeze’ll be the most physical pleasure I’ll get from now on” (*Midwinter Break* 94). Gerry’s albeit witty remark about this potential future loss suggests that he equates sexual pleasure with physical and possibly orgasmic pleasure. His intimated ability to perform sexually (in this case the ability to maintain an unmedicated erection) in his seventies is also subversive and represents an alternative portrayal of ageing men’s sexual experience. Men can and do continue to experience erections into their seventies, free from the pathologised connotations of ubiquitous medication. However, the continuation of the male hegemonic sexual imperative represents a double-edged sword for masculinity.

Predicated on the continuation of phallogentric sex Gerry's masculinity remains intact only until it does not, and so the threat of future impotence is a threat to his sense of masculinity, problematising ageing. Gerry is depicted as continuing to cling to an outmoded sexualised iteration of masculine identity, however Stella is depicted conversely. It is evident that sexuality is not an imperative in her life nor in her construction of gendered identity, as she iterates to Gerry that "sex is not the be-all and end-all. There are other things" (*Midwinter Break* 94).

That is not to say that Stella is not interested in sex, however, just that her gendered identity is not incumbent upon it. Later in the novel, the pair visit the red-light district, although the sex workers on display do nothing to catalyse their libidos and their attention is drawn instead to two policemen's horses. Stella is enthralled by these horses and their animal masculinity, "Feel, Gerry. Broad as an ironing board. I thought it'd be soft – like sheepskin. It's more like a man's chin" (*Midwinter Break* 157). She loves their natural, fecal scent, "leather, and milk and horse apples" (*Midwinter Break* 158). Aroused by the horses Stella instigates their next sexual encounter, suggesting "that they go back to the hotel. Make an early night of it. In the room they made love again" (*Midwinter Break* 158). She even reiterates that "Those horses have got me going" (*Midwinter Break* 158). Stella tries to explain to Gerry, albeit in a circumlocutive manner, that his dependence upon her dampens her arousal, stating that she "takes the notion more often" when on holiday as she is not responsible for the mundane chores of making the dinners (*Midwinter Break* 158). On one level, then, the horses represent a natural, independent animal masculinity that is in total opposition to Gerry.

Stella too considers the future of their sex lives, "Sometimes I wonder if that's the last time" (*Midwinter Break* 158). However, when prompted by Gerry as to whether she wonders or hopes if that is the case, she remains silent, instead snuggling into his arms. This may represent a

similarly ambiguous divergence in the gendered attitude towards ageing. Women, like men, must contend with a host of physical and sexual changes, arguably making penetrative sex less comfortable and thus less attractive. Given that in nature decline in libido affects both men and women of similar age, how then are those women in long term heterosexual relationships to view the profligacy of medication such as Viagra? What is clear is that for Stella, and women like her, whose ageing gendered identity is not predicated upon sexual roles, the absence of sex does not represent the same threat it does to masculinity.

Contextually within the novel, the ambiguity surrounding their differing attitudes towards their respective ageing sexualities is fitting in consideration of the nature of their shared past trauma. For Stella sexuality is repeatedly conflated with pregnancy. Stella seemingly interprets the wife in “The Jewish Bride” as pregnant, commenting that the woman’s hand is “protecting her stomach” indicating that for Stella the portrait combines intimacy and sexuality with pregnancy (*Midwinter Break* 85). The figure in the portrait is rotund but is not generally interpreted as being pregnant, therefore Stella’s interpretation is indicative of her reflection of her own personal trauma. That her relationship with sexuality may be problematic is understandable given the conflation of sexuality and pregnancy with her trauma of having been shot in the stomach while heavily pregnant. Both Gerry and Stella have been scarred by this trauma. Stella’s scars are both literal and emotional, while Gerry attempts to drown out the memories of trauma with alcohol.

Fenton and Miriam have a similarly complicated relationship with sexuality, pregnancy and the trauma of the Troubles. While Fenton enjoys sexual intimacy with his wife, sexuality evokes painful memories of the cause of their childlessness. As an RUC officer he had been made a target of the IRA and the couple had been forced to leave their first home at a moment’s

notice “because their details were in the wrong hands” (*TTC* 283). Fenton recalls “How much she cried when they had to move out ... she let it slip to him that if they stayed in that first home they would have had a baby” (*TTC* 283).

Both Park and MacLavery’s nuanced portrayals of ageing heterosexuality in long-term relationships reflect the plurality and possibility of gendered sexualities. Gilroy’s phallogentric myopia and rigid adherence to the masculine hegemonic code prevents him from experiencing the positive experience that intimacy can bring in ageing relationships. Depicted as impelled solely by “penis passion” (Leverenz 68), Gilroy does not explore sensuality for its own or for his wife’s sake. Unable to divorce his masculine identity from his problematic synecdoche, Gilroy is similarly unable to explore alternative constructions of ageing masculinity. While Gerry and Fenton are undoubtedly deeply flawed and traumatised protagonists, their multifaceted attitudes toward sexuality and intimacy at least allow for less ego and phallogentric ideations of masculinity; they are enabled, rather than limited by, ageing. Analysing these various representations of ageing male heterosexuality facilitates “the study of this transition — from the feelings of invincibility that drive the destructiveness of youth to the growing expectation of vulnerability — [which] throws old masculinity into a valuable relief” (Calasanti & King 19).

### **3. Ageing Masculine Identity: Generativity and Stagnancy in Work, Parenthood and Relationships**

Erik Erikson, author of *The Eight Ages of Man*, was one of the earliest theorists to recognise the importance of progressive life cycles to the construction of identity. Expounding upon Freud’s stages of psychosexual development, Erikson posited eight distinct psychosocial stages demarcating the developmental trajectory one follows throughout life. Of this paradigm the last two stages, “Generativity versus Stagnation”, and the concomitant “Integrity versus Despair,” are central to the construction of identity and self-actualisation of the ageing or aged person. The



negotiation of generativity and stagnation represents the psychosocial task of ageing identity, to negotiate “a reasonable surplus of procreation, productivity and creativity [Generativity] over a pervading mood of personal depletion or self-absorption [Stagnation]” (Erikson 147). The resulting resolution, or indeed irresolution, defines the final psychosocial stage of “Integrity versus Despair” which Thompson defines as “the major developmental task old men face” (51). This section utilises this psychosocial framework to examine the portrayal and construction of the aged masculine identities of Gilroy, Fenton and Gerry, in the typically generative arenas of work, of paternity, and in the context of their long-term relationships.

The role of work and career is of intrinsic importance to the construction and maintenance of hegemonic masculinity. As Solomon and Szabo contend, “Work creates multiple opportunities for a man to see himself as powerful, self-reliant and competent. In general work enables a man to meet the social norms for masculine attitudes and behaviour” (52). This interrelationship between a masculine sense of self-worth as constructed upon and associated with career success presents a distinct challenge for the ageing man’s construction of masculinity. For the younger hegemonic male career success is often a necessary pursuit, middle age is then associated with the achievement of this goal and for the older man career is concerned with the maintenance of power and success, often threatened by a younger generation of men (Solomon & Szabo 50). Moreover, many older men contend with the ramifications of forced retirement, loss of autonomy and agency after a lifetime of predicating one’s masculine ego-ideal as synonymous with a successful career. For the ageing man, it becomes necessary when faced with these issues to extricate one’s gendered identity from the career narrative reflecting, “the task of ego identification versus work role preoccupation” (Peck 51). However for many men the two are so inextricably linked that if one is to dissolve, so too does the

attendant sense of masculine identity. This problematic identification is illustrated to great effect through *The Truth Commissioner's* protagonists, Gilroy (pre-forced retirement) and Fenton (post-forced retirement).

Gilroy faces a number of challenges in his career, once a paramilitary, he has now been elevated to the position of Minister for Children and Culture in the new Assembly. His relationship with this new position of power and authority is an ambivalent one, exemplifying the duality of pride and embarrassment that diminishes his sense of masculinity. On one level Gilroy feels "Pride for himself, the son of a sign painter, pride for his people – the second class citizens – who now through him sit at the very top table" (*TTC* 63). However, at the same time his masculine identity in the role is undermined as he considers himself inherently unsuited to the position due to his lack of education, which he perceives as "a weakness". His sense of masculine pride in his career is undercut by feelings of embarrassment and vulnerability, particularly as he tries and fails to pursue an interest in culture, "he doesn't know where to start and it feels more daunting than anything he's ever done" (*TTC* 73). Gilroy's position is as precarious as his construction of masculinity, depicted as ageing and anachronistic. He is increasingly aware that he is too old for his position, compared to the younger male generation "Who've got degrees coming out of their ears" (*TTC* 275). The ageing Gilroy is forced to face what Caroline Magennis refers to as "a period of renegotiation of identity" necessitated in part by his ageing but is also due to the peace process. Thus, Gilroy's situation reflects that of many older men in Northern Ireland, who are "caught in this transition but have not been equipped to manage or cope with this change" (414).

In fact, this position of power for which Gilroy has sacrificed so much is a role that no longer provides him with much generative satisfaction. Indeed, he spends his whole day

presiding over the most quotidian community complaints involving anti-social teenagers and lost dogs. Rather than the position of autonomy and agency he had hoped for, he feels a “sense of frustration at having so many limits imposed at the very moment when he should be able to embrace his freedom most fully” (*TTC* 97). That his job is mostly constitutive of these mundane tasks is indicative of how “Meaningless task-oriented behaviours only enhance the older man’s sense of helplessness, despair and powerlessness” (Solomon & Szabo 52).

Constrained by both his increasing age and feeling out of place in a modern post-conflict society, Gilroy ruminates on his past in order to negotiate a new ageing identity, attempting to “balance feelings of satisfaction with past commitments and feelings of regret” (Jackson 199). He begins to examine the ethno-nationalist cause to which he dedicated his life from a new perspective and “wonders what it has all been about. For the people? For Ireland?” (*TTC* 82). Theorist Charles Slater outlines how ageing men may examine the choices that “lead to lifetime commitments, a habit of reflecting on the ethical dimensions of what they do, and a sense of responsibility” (*TTC* 61). While Gilroy certainly exemplifies a man who has dedicated himself to the pursuit of an ideal, he is now more cognisant of the negative impacts of that ideal, “He feels the shame of his thoughts, the traitorous serpent of doubt snaking through his lifetime of commitment, trying to undermine all that he has achieved” (*TTC* 82). Gilroy’s association with the death of Connor Walshe signals the long- feared demise of his career. Gilroy’s ageing is a metaphor for an ideology and masculinity that is no longer required in a post-conflict society, “He knows it and the whole world knows it and as soon as a respectable time has elapsed they’ll pension him off” (*TTC* 348). There is a sense of poetic justice in Gilroy’s downfall. As he leaves the narrative, he passes by a mural decorated by a soldier with the “slogan that says it’s time to go and for the briefest of seconds he smiles” (349).

Like Gilroy, Fenton, as retired RUC Inspector, has been displaced from his previous positions of hegemonic power and authority. Indeed, both organisations, no longer congruent in a post-conflict Northern Ireland, have been disbanded. Fenton, like Gilroy, has a problematic relationship with his previous role and its concurrent crisis of generativity and ethical ambiguity. Essentially, he has been forced into retirement, as he reflects that “Like all his generation he had accepted the pension and pay-off deals that were too generous to be refused, even though it stuck in his throat that he was considered part of the corporate embarrassment, part of a past that had to be quietly replaced” (*TTC* 127). Fenton’s ageing is also a metaphor for a masculinity incongruent with the contemporary post-conflict narrative, and he, like many others who embody the traditional masculinity of the past, is simply pensioned off and discarded by society rather than being integrated within it.

Fenton comes to analyse his role in the RUC as having a negative and stagnating impact on his sense of masculine identity. Described in overtly morbid terms, his past career threatens to “squeeze out the life of the present and deaden any vision of the future” (*TTC* 127). It is clear that for both ageing men, far from bolstering their masculinity, their past military and masculine careers only serve to further problematise their constructions of ageing masculinity.

The negative aspects of their careers have been more far-reaching than they first imagined, impacting their personal lives and further eroding their sense of masculinity. Their careers are depicted as having direct ramifications on their construction of paternity. Erikson articulates that generativity “is primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation ...the concept is meant to include ... productivity and creativity” (267). As such it is not difficult to see the potential contribution of parenthood, in this case paternity, to the ongoing negotiation of ageing identity as defined by the conflict of generativity versus stagnancy.

However, one does not automatically cultivate generativity solely by virtue of biological paternity; indeed, the role of parenthood is one equally fraught by ancillary elements of generativity and stagnancy. While parenthood and paternity profoundly contribute to both Gilroy and Fenton's construction of masculinity it is also undermined by both the challenges of ageing and the impact of the problematic intersections between work and the role of fatherhood.

Gilroy is faced with the onset of an impending empty nest syndrome as he must play his last role as father at his daughter Christine's wedding, "Christine, the last of his four children and his only daughter they want him to give away" (*TTC* 80). Moreover, he is frustrated by her decisions in marrying "a man he barely knows and doesn't like" and becoming pregnant to that man before marriage (*TTC* 93). The wedding causes Gilroy to honestly examine his patriarchal construction of paternal masculinity, and to realise that he has not played the ideal role of generative father as he had once thought. Fenton's construction of masculinity is profoundly problematised by his childlessness. Slater notes that one of the most significant crises for the ageing person "is when a couple is unable to have children. The urge to procreate is blocked" (62). Park's depiction of this ageing childless man is unique in its illustration of the profound impact of involuntary childlessness on men. This depiction is no less complex and nuanced than Gilroy's, as Fenton examines the impact his profession had on his ability to parent, both biologically or otherwise. The resultant revelations conspire to undermine his construction of ageing masculine identity as a man whose actions have led him not to integrity, but to despair.

Of all the protagonists, Gilroy has the most physically demonstrative and affectionate relationship with his child. However, as the narrative progresses it is revealed that the relationship is not as perfect as it may appear. He is extradiegetically described reminiscing that, "As a child, she was always trying to outmaneuver him, exploit his weakness for her ... until

she got what she wanted ... He smiles as he thinks of the school revolt she led against the petty strictures of the nuns" (*TTC* 90). Moreover, that "their relationship had been a continual skirmish and long ago he gave up trying to rein her in and if anything he loves her for her independence of spirit" (*TTC* 90). Gilroy's sentimental reflections on his daughter's childhood fondly inflate his paternal identification, her childlike demand for his approbation, "when she wanted him to come and see something she was proud of" (*TTC* 115). Christine is no longer a child, however, and as the narrative progresses Gilroy is forced to see the reality of his paternal role beyond the nostalgia, the truth of which increasingly undermines his construction of masculinity. He considers "his guilt for all his too frequent absences, the constant strain of living life on the edge of fear, of being a child sitting in her pyjamas on the top of the stairs as the Brits kicked in the door" (*TTC* 90). His wife also reminds him, "Francis, we owe her. Big time! For all the times we couldn't take her places, or even go see her do things. For all the times you weren't there" (*TTC* 105). The reality of his absence, his lack of paternal care and thus generativity is a blow that leaves him "suddenly feeling so weary that he wants to sit down...somewhere he's not confronted by his reflection" (*TTC* 105). The precarious nature of his construction of paternal masculinity is highlighted further when he is forced to face his daughter's adult decisions. Far from admiring her independence of spirit, these decisions serve to undermine his perceived patriarchal authority, further eroding his precarious construction of an ageing masculine identity. Gilroy is frustrated that his perceived patriarchal authority over his daughter has been taken from him, that his daughter has made her own choice, a choice he deems as morally wrong. Gilroy is not only losing his daughter, but also the Lacanian "Law of the Father." This is Jacques Lacan's concept of the role of the father in the Symbolic order. In *Écrits*, Lacan states the need to recognise "the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified

this person with the figure of the law” (Lacan 66). Stuart Aitken writes of the “father’s struggle against formative notions of a patriarchal norm that prescribes a ‘law of the father’” (134). Gilroy no longer has perceived authority over his daughter, and is disappointed by her life choices. Her pregnancy particularly challenges him in a way he struggles to articulate, “He feels betrayed but by whom and in what way he struggles to understand” (*TTC* 110). She has betrayed the traditionalist values he espouses, that marriage and family is “the best and most important institution in society and at the very heart of the Irish nation” (*TTC* 120). He is frustrated by and is resentful of his daughter; in getting pregnant she has undermined his authority in choosing to do something so against his own personal ethics and morals, “he feels anger towards her. Why for once can she not bide her time, do things in the right way, the right order like everyone else?” (*TTC* 110). He is increasingly frustrated by the fact that she makes her own decisions independently of him, “Why does she not think of others instead of following every impulse that runs through her selfish head?” (*TTC* 110). Clearly the “others” to whom Gilroy refers is himself.

However, Gilroy comes to realise that he never truly filled the traditional, patriarchal role, realising that he never had paternal control and masculine power. This is evident in the remark “What does it matter to her now if he gives her a father’s blessing or not because he can’t think of a single time when she ever came to him and truly sought approval or permission” (*TTC* 110). The wedding ceremony provokes much rumination on Gilroy’s part, the symbolism further fuel to weaken his pride and paternal identification. Already struggling with issues of redundancy brought on by ageing, he sees his position as being usurped, threatened by the younger man in Christine’s life. When he sees Justin rest his arm over Christine’s shoulder Gilroy “reads different things, affection, the offer of protection, but there is also something

proprietary in it, an assertion of new ownership” (*TTC* 107). This challenges and undermines his masculinity, as he has been supplanted in his position as the most influential and important male figure in his daughter’s life. This is reinforced at the end of the wedding ceremony, when “another man walks her down the aisle. Walks her away from them ... and all eyes are on the couple and for the first time no one is looking at him” (*TTC* 116). Justin has replaced Gilroy, it is he who is now the centre of attention, both in the ceremony and his daughter’s life.

Gilroy regards the wedding, and his role therein, as an empty performance. Given that the titular role of father of the bride, much like his paternal role, is in name only, his performance is insincere; only going through the motions, “he’s supposed to be overcome with her beauty and a father’s pride but something is failing to register and he looks only at her face before he mumbles the expected phrases” (*TTC* 111). The symbolic act of walking his daughter up the aisle is fraught with tension, “suddenly it feels like a high wire that he must walk without stumbling or looking down” (*TTC* 114). This delicate balancing act is on both a conscious and subconscious level and represents the fine line Gilroy treads in performing masculinity. He is in a precarious position, at home and in his career and feels that if he does not adhere to the traditional prescriptions of patriarchy, “surely he will fall, hurtle into the darkness below” (*TTC* 114). This metaphor exemplifies how “the crises of masculinities both foment and are created by the awkward spaces within which fathers live” (Aitkin 134).

The climax of the ceremony for Gilroy, the point at which he must give his daughter away, mirrors a similar peak in his stream of consciousness, wherein he attempts to evaluate the true impact of his paternity. Letting her go he imagines that she is a “small boat unmooring and setting out to sea” and that he is the harbour in which to shelter (*TTC* 115). However, he reaches



a moment of epiphany realising that “he was never the provider of safety but rather the person who put her at risk, the father who always put her needs second to what he saw as the bigger needs of the cause” (*TTC* 115).

Gutman and Huyck note that psychosomatic symptomology is often a sign of a maladaptive attitude to masculine ageing: men “frequently complain of somatic symptoms that can have a psychogenic basis” (70). This is particularly pertinent to Gilroy, for whom feelings of guilt, shame and loss pertaining to his daughter are powerful motivators for feelings of physical illness. Made despondent by her actions Gilroy considers that it was perhaps “his fault for not having looked after her properly” (*TTC* 110). This prompts Gilroy to feel ill. Indeed, he wonders if he may be “in the first stages of some serious illness where he is afflicted by some unseen chemical changes, by antibodies and viruses invading his nervous system and wreaking havoc in his internal circuitry” (*TTC* 111). Giving his daughter away, he has the epiphany that he “was never the provider of safety, but rather the person who put her at risk,” he feels “a sudden pain, as if he has swallowed something sharp and it has journeyed through his veins to lodge in his heart” (*TTC* 115). Gilroy’s health degenerates into a rapid decline after his daughter’s marriage, “after the wedding he feels empty, drained of whatever used to sustain him from one day to the next” (*TTC* 261). He feels he has lost his association with paternity, the last patriarchal male bastion upon which he relied to sustain a positive, generative masculine identity.

As iterated, Park’s depiction of Fenton and the impact of involuntary childlessness in negotiating his ageing masculinity is rare and poignant. Society often places greater importance on the implications of women not having children than men. Jessica Valenti argues in *The Guardian* that “men have the distinct privilege of being considered full and fulfilled people no matter what their parenthood status” whereas women are thought of as somehow incomplete

“without a bouncing baby on their hips.” This prejudicial view is damaging on several levels. It both reinforces stereotypical female gender roles and also disregards the important role fatherhood, or the lack thereof, may potentially play in the construction of masculinity.

Critics like Dykstra have declaimed the paucity of academic inquiry into the impact of childlessness on men as they “are generally excluded from the work on the psycho-social effects of involuntary childlessness” (1). Theorists Robin and Terry Hadley are endeavouring to address this lack, examining the particular impact of childlessness on men in society. James Fenton’s childlessness signifies a deep wound in his construction of masculinity. In total contradiction to Valenti’s assertion Fenton does not feel childless and fulfilled, rather, he mourns the “inexpressible sense of loss” at not having any children, for which he and his wife Miriam blame the Troubles in Belfast (*TTC* 275). Fenton feels his loss acutely, reflecting Robin Hadley’s research that childless men experience “higher levels of anger, depression, jealousy, and isolation than women” (132).

Fenton and his wife Miriam are acutely affected by their childlessness. The narrator describes that they both live self-contained lives, “as a distraction for the absence that leaves an unresolved and instinctively agreed, inexpressible sense of loss lingering indelibly below the surface” (*TTC* 127). Angry and resentful, Fenton feels that someone should “answer now for his past, for a woman in middle age crying because she thinks somehow she lost her chance to have a child” (*TTC* 286). Fenton’s wife Miriam, however, is able to define herself in an alternative caretaking role, taking care of her ill father. He notes that “She’s been at her best in this care, generous of her time and giving of herself” (128). Miriam has been able to renegotiate a generative sense of ageing identity, whereas Fenton is unable to renegotiate a similarly positive

and purposeful ageing identity. Stuck in the past for which “he blames the absence of children in his marriage and believes that it diminishes his ability to move on” (*TTC* 127).

Fenton attempts to bolster his masculinity with physical activity and by volunteering with the church and a Romanian orphanage. Ian M. Harris refers to this activity as “the Good Samaritan” masculine trope or “message that men hear” from society, endeavouring to define their masculinity by good deeds worthy of a good man (12). Indeed, Fenton may be subconsciously trying atone for his past actions in the Troubles as well as trying to do charitable works in order to stimulate generativity in his life. He gives serious thought to adopting a boy in the orphanage called Florian, who he deems “the son he never had, the child that will make sense of his and Miriam’s life, pull together the frayed edges of his existence” (*TTC* 175). The challenges of ageing, however, prevent this from occurring as Fenton knows he and Miriam are too old to adopt children and so “even that dream is undermined” (*TTC* 145). It is Fenton who is described as the more preoccupied and emotional in terms of the couple’s childlessness, more sorrowful and regretful than Miriam. Thus, it is not difficult to see why these feelings would further undermine his sense of masculinity. Fenton’s attempts to reconcile the stagnancy of his past actions with generative actions have been a failure. It “has been a failure because despite everything, despite his active days, the involvement with his church and the Romanian orphanage, it feels as if nothing has been shed” (*TTC* 141).

However, as Slater explains, in the context of generativity, “Parenting, means more than being a biological parent” (62). Indeed, while Fenton resents not being a biological parent, his relationship with Connor Walshe, whom he recruits as an informant, quickly assumes paternal dimensions. Fenton quite clearly encourages the paternal identification in order to groom Connor as an informant. He “gives praise and dangles the opportunity of a better future in front of him.

He tells him that they will take care of him, that they will look after him” (*TTC* 148). This simulacra of parenthood is devoid of the generativity associated with conscientious paternity. Fenton is manipulating a boy he views as no more than a tool, someone “anonymous and irrelevant, part of his world which he’d no need to consider” (*TTC* 151).

Connor’s increasing dependence on this bond gradually repulses Fenton, “he’s grown tired now, tired of the boy’s whining self-pity” (*TTC* 151). As the narrator observes, the boy is beginning to smell. Fenton isn’t sure if it’s real or the product of his imagination” (*TTC* 151). Fenton can almost synesthetically smell the desperation of Connor’s father hunger as “something that seems to seep from his pores and infect the air around him” (*TTC* 41). Repulsed by the emotions that Connor is unwittingly evoking in him, Fenton drops Connor as an informant and ends their relationship. Fenton terminates the relationship in a manner that a real or at least responsible, father cannot do. Connor does his best to desperately repair and resume their relationship, “I’ll do better for you’ he says. ‘I’ll do good for you, get you whatever you want, I swear” (*TTC* 153). It is this information that Connor so desperately attempts to procure that results in his role as informer being revealed and thus leads to his death. Fenton fails in his role as vicarious father and thus, his paternal association is a negative one, only further eroding his sense of masculinity.

However, Connor is not the only boy that Fenton fails in his role of parent by proxy. At the Romanian orphanage he meets a boy called Florian, and their relationship also represents another (missed) paternal opportunity. Even the similarity in their names, Florian and Fenton, hints at the suitability of this child to be his son and Fenton’s mind “races with the kind of images only the childless secretly store, and with each one his heart goes a little faster” (*TTC* 145). Knowing that Fenton is unable to legally adopt him, Florian sneaks into Fenton’s car in an

attempt to travel back to Belfast. Fenton however, becomes aware that Florian is there and then considers bringing him to Northern Ireland. He “thinks of the boy’s rightful future life stifled and taken from him” if he were to let him remain in Romania, however at the last minute he sees Connor’s “white owl face” a reminder of his previous failure and so turns the car around, abandoning Florian to his fate (*TTC* 176).

Fenton’s inability to be responsible for these boys undermines his ability to generate a positive ageing masculinity, not only lacking biological children of his own, but also as he realises that he has failed “two boys who thought he would look after them and tried to shelter inside his protection” (*TTC* 327). The consequent guilt scars him and renders him unable to construct a generative, masculine identity, “Now Fenton believes that’s why he was never to be a father, because one day he would kill a boy. Not only destroy one boy, but two” (*TTC* 358).

Solomon & Swazbo argue that “The key for the older man is to be able to find ways of maintaining generativity and opportunities to create and use options for continued successful behaviours” (51). Fenton and Gilroy, however, are trapped by the negative impact of their careers compounded by their respective failures in the potentially generative role as fathers. Neither man is able to negotiate a positive ageing male identity. Both Gilroy and Fenton are defined by ego-preoccupation, which Peck observes as occurring when “the older man thinks solely of what he has done, what he could have done, or what he should have done” (53). This is a maladaptive, pathological response to establishing an ageing identity, as it is possible for men to achieve ego transcendence. This is an adaptive renegotiation of identity in which “the older man is able to use past experiences, strengths and feelings of success as sources of ideas ... consistent with his physical, psychological and sociological station in life” (53). Park deliberately portrays these men as ageing, decaying and anachronistic in their senescence, rather

than positive and adaptive. It is clear that Park's text itself serves as a 'Truth Commission' investigating the roles of these men and passing judgment on their embodiments of an outmoded masculinity.

Finally, one cannot examine the depiction of the ageing protagonists in these novels without taking into account their long-term relationships. Of course, it is incumbent to note that each protagonist studied is in an ageing relationship and while the two texts devote differing amounts of the narrative to these couples, marriage is an important context to consider in the ageing man's experience. Gutman and Huyck argue that late-life couples move towards a more androgynous gender expression, that old men and women "take on appetites, attitudes and even behaviours characteristic of the opposite sex" (66-67). Adopting stereotypically feminine traits should not be seen as degendering the ageing man, but rather broadening his experience of gendered identity and facilitating positive adaptation and renegotiation of identity. However, this may precipitate a crisis for those ageing men whose identities rely on the traditional masculine hegemonic script, for whom the attribution of feminine qualities or traits represents a demeaning and undermining of their staunchly macho ideology. This can be especially difficult for long-married men for whom "it is not simply the loss of gender clarity within the self that proves traumatic, but the corresponding changes within the spouse" (Gutman & Huyck 68). Research has proven that women become more independent with age, more "unsentimental and confident in asserting their own desires" (Gutman & Huyck 68). Men, conversely, become more dependent, sentimental and vulnerable (69). Women are more likely to positively adapt to ageing which is depicted in sharp relief to the male protagonists in these novels, heightening the men's ambivalence toward old age.

While the relationship between Gilroy and his wife is not given much narrative depth, one may nonetheless perceive how gendered inversions undermine Gilroy's sense of masculinity. Not only physically dependent on his wife, he perceives himself as more emotionally vulnerable than she, describing her as having "an edge that he has softened but never vanquished" (*TTC* 75). One may extrapolate that this in turn profoundly emasculates Gilroy, who looks towards his wife for emotional reassurance, "her tone is soft as if she is speaking to a child" (*TTC* 82). As he kisses his wife tenderly, she merely nods and "pats him on the back as if sending one of her sons off to school" (84). It is as if Gilroy is no longer a man to his wife but rather a child, clearly exacerbating Gilroy's ambivalent construction of ageing masculinity.

While Fenton, on the other hand, is not physically dependent on his wife, he does notice her more positive adaptation to old age. Despite the fact that they both regret their childlessness, it is Miriam who has been able to cope with old age, identifying herself in the role of caretaker to her father. This is sufficiently generative to support Miriam's sense of identity versus despair, taking care of another being the prime motivator of generativity. James Fenton, however, as discussed, is unable to similarly negotiate a positive adaptive renegotiation of ageing masculinity and is confounded by self-absorption.

However the gendered attitudinal divide towards ageing identity is indubitably best depicted in Bernard MacLaverty's *Midwinter Break*. Payne notes that ageing for many men precipitates maladaptive methods of coping, most notably through addiction, as Gerry illustrates. His misuse of alcohol has progressed throughout his life. One may infer that the trauma of his pregnant wife's shooting precipitated his alcoholism. At many points during his break in Amsterdam Gerry ruminates on his life and missed opportunities, and memories of the past trauma rise to the surface which he then attempts to drown in alcohol. Despite wanting to

be an architect, “Gerry had ended up a university teacher. One who drank too much. Was his failure to make it to the top to be blamed on his drinking? Or did his drinking come about to take the edge off his lack of success” (*Midwinter Break* 149). Stella acknowledges that while Gerry’s drinking has always been problematic, in his youth he had been able to some extent to control it. However, it is now in his old age that his drinking has become unmanageable, causing a rift between them of which Gerry is unaware.

Gerry’s drinking may also reflect an alternative pathogenic cause, namely, to legitimise his dependency on Stella. Gerry conforms to Gutman and Huyck’s description of syntonically dependent men, those who become entirely dependent on their wives in late life and “suffer masked feelings of abandonment” (70). There is little doubt that Stella is Gerry’s sole reason for existence, their relationship the foundation of his ageing identity. MacLaverty’s description of Gerry holding his wife in bed is a powerful image of how the two are inextricably linked, “He aligned himself to her. Her heel to his instep, knee to back of knee, bum to lap. They were as soft stacked chairs” (*Midwinter Break* 8). Gerry defines his whole life in the context of their relationship, from his conference trips in which “Most of the time he insisted on having Stella with him” (*Midwinter Break* 5) to aspects of his life that are differentiated by her absence, “Stella wasn’t there” (*Midwinter Break* 79). Her ubiquitous presence is emphasised by those rare absences as when crossing the road, he “reached out to take Stella by the hand before realising she wasn’t with him” (*Midwinter Break* 60). It becomes evident that Gerry is also practically dependent on his wife, who is responsible for the household chores, the ironing, the cooking, even buying his pyjamas. As she drolly comments, “Priests normally have enough independence to buy their own pyjamas” (*Midwinter Break* 22). Gerry is also constantly seeking approval and



assurance from Stella, “Do you feel close to me?” he asks her (136), or “Am I anywhere in your storyboard?” (*Midwinter Break* 109).

Gutman and Huyck describe how syntonic dependent men often unconsciously choose “nurturing, yet managerial wives” (71). This is certainly true of Gerry as Stella has always been identified as “an organiser – that kind of woman” (*Midwinter Break* 31). As the omniscient narrator observes, “Gerry referred to her as ‘transport captain’. Organising journeys, booking hotels, contacting people to meet them, seeing the whole journey in her mind’s eye before they ever left home” (31). These theorists go on to argue that often the syntonic man has always been dependent on his wife. (Gutman & Huyck 72). In their postpaternal years, they explicate, these men, satisfied that they “have done their duty as good providers ... move to occupy the filial niche that their launched children have emptied” (72). Gerry’s alcoholism maybe be exacerbated by a syntonic, unconscious desire to legitimise his neediness and dependency on his wife; it is a way of saying “If I cannot be your child, then I will be your patient” (Gutman & Huyck 76). Gerry’s alcoholism is an example of how he distances himself from the shame and guilt of his dependency on his wife. Like other men he removes blame “from the psyche, for which they do feel responsible, to the soma for which they bear no responsibility” (76).

Stella is depicted as the very opposite of Gerry and is illustrative of research which has shown that “as the husband discovers his covert dependency, the wife has recaptured the striving of autonomy and self-assertion that she had kept on hold during the emergency years of parenthood” (Payne 72). Indeed, this reversal of attitude has caused a schism between the two, one to which Gerry remains totally oblivious, despite Stella’s numerous attempts to make him understand. She now cherishes her time apart from Gerry, “She loved this hour to herself – this separation at the end of every day” (*Midwinter Break* 12). Emancipated from her domestic

gendered role as mother, Stella embodies that ageing woman who “is more apt to be interested in her own growth, rather than the growth and nurturance of others” (72). As Stella herself notes, “The family is raised – the work’s done” (109). Stella feels compelled to find a new direction, “We’re not getting any younger. I find I’m at a loose end – aimless. There’s no role for me” (*Midwinter Break* 107). Stella’s desire is to leave Gerry and start a life “with a community of women who lived useful and happy independent lives” (*Midwinter Break* 200). Gerry has moulded his ageing identity as dependent upon Stella and their relationship whereas to Stella “We’ve cut the cloth of our lives wrongly. It doesn’t fit. I have, at least” (*Midwinter Break* 109). Anne Enright, again in her review for *The Irish Times*, describes Gerry’s lack of awareness of Stella’s motivations as “obtuse” however it is perhaps not totally surprising that Gerry has not noticed the changes in Stella. Payne describes the ageing woman as “still present in the home, usually cooking the meals and sharing the conjugal bed... The true change is internal” (72). For Stella the urge to find meaning in her life is a spiritual one, as she is a Catholic who became more devout after she and her child survived the shooting during the Troubles. This recourse to faith in late life is common, particularly among women, as Payne summarises, “Observations about religious life across the life cycle have shown that adults become more religious as they grow older and that women are more religious than men at every age” (86). While Gerry’s alcoholism is motivated by his trauma, Stella has instead sublimated her trauma into generative, spiritual growth, “She wanted to live the life of her Catholicism. This was where her kindness, if she had any, her generosity, her sense of justice had all come from” (*Midwinter Break* 201). Her religious vocation is described in explicitly generative terms as “the source of her spiritual stem cells” (*Midwinter Break* 201). Stella’s spiritual devotion, however, is a source of consternation for atheist Gerry, who denigrates her faith throughout the novel. Gerry’s reaction is indicative of

multi-layered concerns on his part. While ostensibly he disagrees with her on an ideological basis, their opposing viewpoints also indicate just how far removed Stella has become from Gerry. Her appointment as Eucharistic Minister comes as a total shock to him and he is similarly shocked as he sees her kneel before their bed in Amsterdam to say her prayers. For Gerry, Stella's spirituality is synonymously emblematic of her move away from him and towards a life of independence and devotion, stimulating his unconscious fears of rejection and abandonment. As Payne articulates, "The wife's developmental moves towards greater independence and self-fulfilment seem to pose a notable threat to his security, often expressed as fear of desertion or abandonment" (71). On some level Gerry slowly becomes aware of Stella's subjective shifts, thus he continually seeks her assurance as she describes the 'storyboard' of her ideal later life.

Understandably, Stella becomes increasingly resentful of and frustrated by Gerry's dependency. She repeatedly tries and fails to explain to Gerry her resentment of the myriad household chores and responsibilities she must perform in her old age. This explains why she feels more sexually aroused on holiday, "Because I don't have to think of dinners. The dinner. On a daily basis. It's the bane of my life" (*Midwinter Break* 158). She reminds Gerry of a joke about married sheep, wherein the male sheep complains, "I'm fed up eating the same grass day in day out ... And Missus Sheep says, At least I don't have to cook it" (*Midwinter Break* 158). This reaction towards the ageing male's increasing dependency is quite typical, as Payne articulates, "Predictably the wives in turn complain of their husband's extreme dependency and burdensome self-centred demands. In this respect, the wives appear to be excellent diagnosticians: 'My husband is a dependent baby' or 'He doesn't want a wife he wants a mother'" (71). Stella desperately tries to extricate herself from this co-dependent thinking, however even as she makes plans to leave Gerry and sell the house, she considers that "Gerry would have to get

rid of all those books and CDs. Make his own dinners. Maybe he should look for a flat near Marks & Spencer” (*Midwinter Break* 202). She interrupts her own stream of consciousness as she becomes aware that, so habituated to the caring female role, “there she was – doing it again – organising him. Trying to look after him” (*Midwinter Break* 202).

Stella is acutely cognisant of Gerry’s alcoholism despite his attempts to hide it. She is also aware that alcoholism is the major contributor to his dependent attitude. She speculates for the first time in the novel what the underlying cause of Gerry’s drinking may be. As she realises that cause is undoubtedly her traumatic shooting during the Troubles, she acknowledges that “She had healed but maybe he had not” (*Midwinter Break* 239). The two have been so divided, so separated, that they have become strangers to each other, but thinking of the cause of Gerry’s drinking rather than the effects of his alcoholism on her shifts Stella’s attitude towards Gerry. She is able, by the end of the novel, to confront Gerry about his drinking, to admit straight out that she has wanted to leave him and will if the drinking doesn’t stop. For the first time in the novel, the two openly and honestly communicate, face to face and on the same level. Gerry explains “I hate myself when I’m drinking” and when Stella points out that he drinks all the time, he responds “So I hate myself all the time” (*Midwinter Break* 240). In a tender moment Stella announces to Gerry “I’ll help you fall in love with yourself again” (*Midwinter Break* 240).

While nothing is certain and the novel is open-ended – the couple sleeping in an airport awaiting a delayed flight – it does close on a positive, potentially optimistic note. Stella wants to renew her faith in Gerry and use her positive attitude to ageing to help him. Gerry for his part seems determined to give up alcohol to keep her by his side because “To him her presence was as important as the world. And the stars around it. If she was an instance of goodness in this world then passing through by her side was miracle enough” (*Midwinter Break* 243). Stella

remains the star of Gerry's life; she is his religion and potentially his saving grace. At the end of the novel, the two have renegotiated the terms of their relationship and how to move forward in their ageing identities together. As Stella articulates "We haven't all that long so we should cherish each other" (*Midwinter Break* 240).

Park's portrayal of the ageing Francis Gilroy indubitably illustrates Thompson's argument for the discontinuous narrative of ageing masculinity. Gilroy's sense of masculinity is so rooted within the physical, what Peck refers to as "body preoccupation", that the biological manifestations of ageing signal an absolute interruption to his masculine identity, echoing the "discontinuous model of gender across the life span and a formulation wherein the older man is emasculated by ageing" (Thompson 16). Gilroy is unable to negotiate an alternative, ageing masculinity that is extricated from the traditional masculine bodily imperative, a masculinity not indebted to or reliant upon physical masculinity and strength, a process Peck defines as "bodily transcendence". Thus, as the previously strong, hegemonic body of his youth senesces into progressive physical decrepitude so too does his own masculine identity.

In reminiscing about his life, necessary for Erikson's final stage of psychosocial development, ego integrity versus ego despair, the reader, like Gilroy, comes to realise that his patriarchal masculinity has in fact had a destructive impact over all aspects of his life. His career, to which he dedicated a lifetime of violent struggle, is little more than an empty title, dogged by bureaucracy in which he can affect no real, generative change for his people. That his career is stultified further undermines not only his sense of masculine pride in having achieved this position, but also calls into question the benefit of his previous hypermasculine paramilitary role. The nationalist cause to which he dedicated his life has had a destructive rather than generative impact on his life. He has claimed lives, either directly or indirectly, as seen in the murder of

Connor Walshe. Furthermore, his violent hypermasculine identification has detrimentally affected his relationship with his daughter. Not the protective, patriarchal father that he envisioned, he realises that instead his involvement made him absent from her life at best and put her in harm's way at worst. The stagnating influence of his masculinity contributes to his ego despair, from which the typically generative role of father has not exculpated him. Gilroy's patriarchal hypermasculinity is like a cancer, a stagnating and pervading dis-ease eating away at his construction of identity and plunging him into despair. Park depicts Gilroy as clearly unable to prioritise generativity over stagnation in his life, and the stultifying influence is always connected to this destructive masculinity. Evidently Park judges that there is no room for patriarchal, hegemonic masculinity in a post-conflict Northern Ireland. For Gilroy, and men like him, it is indeed "Time to go" (*TTC* 36).

Park's depiction of James Fenton clearly reflects a different but no less problematic attitude towards establishing an ageing masculine identity. The similarly body-preoccupied Fenton embodies a continuous narrative of ageing masculinity, evidenced by his efforts to maintain and strengthen his physical stamina and also by his continuing ability to make love to his wife. Fenton is an older man emblematic of the continuity perspective, reflecting Thompson's theory that "men's gendered social worlds do not appreciably change throughout the life course; rather old men continue to participate in the 'institutionalised' practices ... and continue to reveal consistency in their self-conceptions" (Thompson 17). However, his portrayal also delineates the many theoretical arguments for the limitations of the continuity model of gendered ageing. Thompson argues that "While this strategy preserves an acceptable (i.e. young) masculine self, it runs the risk of denying the ageing process" (17). Indeed, Fenton's risk-taking and self-imposed isolation only contributed to further stagnation in his life and his construction

of a masculine identity. He continues to live as per his hegemonic identification, ignoring the ageing process rather than capitalising upon it to inspire productive, generative change. Like Gilroy, Fenton's own sense of masculinity has been a destructive, undermining force in his life rather than a generative one. Despite being from an alternative ethno-political stance to Gilroy, his destructive participation in the past and his failure to act as a generative father figure, biologically, vicariously or ideologically, makes him unable to balance generativity with stagnation in his life, precipitating his ego despair.

It is evident in these portrayals of these two ageing men, both equally responsible for Connor Walshe's death that Park considers these male characters, their participation in the Troubles and the masculinity they espouse and embody, as incongruous and unsuitable for a post-conflict Northern Ireland. That regardless of which side of the ethnopolitical divide one inhabits, traditional masculine ideology has a stagnating, destructive effect on oneself and society and no place in the construction of a post-conflict masculinity.

Bernard MacLaverty's depiction of Gerry in *Midwinter Break* is a more nuanced and complex portrayal of ageing masculinity problematised by the Troubles. Reflecting a more integrative approach to ageing masculinity, it is neither solely continuous nor discontinuous but a combination of both and is therefore more emblematic of a position within a spectrum. Gerry reflects to an extent the concept of a dynamic continuity rather than stasis and so represents an opportunity to adapt to the changes the ageing process entails, and that "in making adaptive choice middle-aged and older adults attempt to preserve and maintain existing internal and external structures" (Atchley 183). Gerry is distinctly different from Park's protagonists in several key areas. Firstly, Gerry's masculinity is never presented as physically congruent with the hegemonic script. As an architect Gerry prided himself upon his education, creativity and

intelligence rather than any physical capability. Furthermore, neither Gerry nor the masculinity he embodies is depicted as patriarchal, violent or hegemonic. Unlike Fenton and Gilroy, Gerry was uninvolved in the Troubles. Although Catholic with nationalist sympathies, he deplores violence. As the narrator remarks, “If the end of human decency was the price of a United Ireland, Gerry wanted nothing to do with it” (*Midwinter Break* 46). After the trauma of Stella’s shooting the two move to Scotland, intent to avoid Northern Ireland and its troubles for the rest of their lives. Despite his alcoholism Gerry, even under the influence, is not depicted as more passive than aggressive, he is always happy to acquiesce to his wife taking the lead, and is gentle, loving and demonstrative. While Gerry mourns that his career never reached the potential it perhaps could have, his masculinity is not reliant upon material success. Generativity may be defined as “any caring, outwards directed activity that contributes to the generation of new or more mature individuals, ideas, products or works of art” (Clare 171). Thus, while Gerry’s role as a father is not portrayed in any great detail, as a teacher he nonetheless played a generative, creative role in educating the next generation. Gerry’s alcoholism, his maladaptive coping mechanism to deal with the trauma of the Troubles, is his most obvious detriment and destructive habit. The effects on his wife now isolated by his drinking as well the potential effect alcohol might have had on his career, are indicative of its stagnating influence. Overall, one might argue that Gerry is depicted as existing on a precipice, oscillating between ego integrity and despair. His life is roughly balanced between generativity and stagnation, although it may yet go either way. However, there is hope that under Stella’s guiding feminine influence he can reclaim his life. Gerry’s ageing masculinity, out of all the protagonists, is depicted as the most generative and adaptive. His relationship with Stella reflects that an integration of masculine and feminine attitudes towards ageing enables and facilitates a more positive gendered ageing experience. It is



only by embracing both may one continue to adapt and establish a healthy gendered construction of identity in older age.

In the genre of novel that all too often depicts the young male protagonists that reflect the truncated hegemonic script, it is crucial to include and expand upon alternative masculinities, such as ageing masculinities. There is much to be learned from these depictions, for example the positive plurality in alterity to phallocentric sexuality. The complementary pairing of ageing men and women in long term relationships destigmatising men from the negative stereotype of the 'dirty old man'. Moreover, as this chapter demonstrates, the traumatic scars of the Troubles are just as profound in later life as they are depicted in youth, if not more so. For these older men renegotiation of a changing, ageing masculinity is exacerbated by the recontextualisation of a new socio-political reality of post-conflict Northern Ireland. Ageing in this case necessitates a number of positive adaptations in order to engender a satisfying and generative masculine identity.

## Conclusion

This thesis demonstrates that literary fictional depictions of masculinities in the Northern Irish post-conflict novel continue to change and evolve. It establishes that this literature plays a key role in both constructing and construing increasingly diverse models of masculinity which offer more accurate representations of contemporary Northern Irish society. Through analysis of novels published over the past twenty years, my research explicates how the post-conflict novel, with its focus on the themes and manifestations of trauma and memory, is uniquely placed to engage with and explore the detrimental impact of the often violent, hegemonic masculinities associated with the Troubles on emerging constructions of masculinity. Furthermore, this thesis illustrates that depictions of masculinities have continued to develop concomitantly with the increasing openness of Northern Irish post-conflict society, destabilising the hierarchical hegemonic paradigm by iterating and embracing a multivalent spectrum of male experience.

In order to establish a suitable point of origin for my chronothematic examination of the developing depiction of masculinities, I began my research with “Chapter One: Troubling Masculinities: The Traumatized Masculine in Sean O’Reilly’s *Love and Sleep: A Romance* and *The Swing of Things*”. In this chapter I introduce and establish the narrative conventions and emergence of trauma fiction as a genre and, crucially, the importance of contextualising O’Reilly’s novels as such. Depicting the transitional period of early post-conflict society, his novels dramatise not only the damaging impact of trauma on masculinities, but also the inherently traumatising effect that dominant hegemonic ideals inflict on the construction of masculinity. This is particularly true of protagonists Niall and Boyle, for whom “Shame of the victim, guilt of the survivor” (*TSOT* 294) is wholly incongruent with Northern Irish society’s prescription of stoic, silent, hegemonic masculinities. I demonstrate that these characters, by

externalising their inner feelings of emasculation, instead fuel the continuing narrative of violent, hegemonic masculinity. I emphasise the complicit role played by an equally traumatised Northern Irish society in propagating a stifling and inhibitory hegemonic masculinity, and by silencing and minimising the role that trauma plays in men's lives. The two protagonists, the pathological, neurotic Niall and Noel Boyle, murdered by his own fraternity, are victims of the struggle to establish and articulate their own developing alternative expressions of masculinity. Dark, brutal and furious, O'Reilly's invective rails against a hypocritical and masculinist society, whose dictates of masculinity confine, restrict and often encourage the very negative and violent masculinities from which those living in Northern Ireland have been trying to escape.

My second chapter, "Queering Masculinities: Locating and Locuting the Other in the Northern Irish Post-Conflict *Bildungsroman*," proves that there has indeed been an increasingly audible queer voice in the Northern Irish novel post-millennium, if one is but willing to listen. This is currently the first and only analysis of novels by queer authors depicting queer protagonists in the Northern Irish post-conflict novel. I parallel the chronothematic trajectory established in the first chapter by beginning my examination with Jarlath Gregory's 2001 novel *Snapshots*. Published only the year before *Love and Sleep*, but depicting the same time period, Gregory's novel explores the problematic navigation and construction of queer masculinity juxtaposed with the hegemonic influence of the Troubles in the late nineties, pre-IRA ceasefire. My analysis also incorporates McNicholl's *A Son Called Gabriel*, Kennedy's *The Arrival of Fergal Flynn* and McVeigh's *The Good Son*, to analyse how the depiction of queer masculinities, reinforced by the *bildung* narrative, depicts sexuality as increasingly dynamic, fluid and non-essentialist. On a narrative level I examine how the literary tradition of the *bildungsroman*, particularly in post-conflict societies, is a particularly apposite format for what is known as the

coming-out novel, and how each of the authors uniquely subverts and adapts this format to emphasise or undermine this narrative. Crucially, this type of narrative allows for the examination of the much-overlooked areas of literary masculinity, such as the childhood construction of masculinity and sexuality. Finally, I also postulate that the Irish literary tradition of the *bildungsroman* may lend itself to Nationalist writers from the North as an established format within which to write. Indeed, my research shows that queer novels since the millennium are both written by and depict masculinities within a Catholic, Nationalist background. While sociology is outside the remit of this thesis, I examine the statistical data that demonstrates that historically members identifying as Catholic and Nationalist have been more open and accepting of homosexuality, as opposed to the converse being true for those of the Protestant and Unionist community. This may be due to a sense of affinity between marginalised minorities and a confluence of minority politics. As Cathy Cohen suggests, “At the intersection of oppression and resistance lies the radical potential of queerness to bring together all those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics” (203). I conclude with the observation that, somewhat ironically, this minority voice is coming to potentially dominate queer discourse in Northern Ireland.

Anthea Corder’s thesis, “Writing the Troubles: Gender and Trauma in Northern Ireland” incorporates an illuminating section on Deirdre Madden and Jennifer Johnston’s novels and the depiction of generational trauma and femininity. Robert Garratt makes some reference to generational trauma theory in Johnston’s writing in his monograph *Trauma and History in the Irish Novel: The Return of the Dead*. However, my third chapter is the first to examine literary fictional representations of post-conflict Northern Irish masculinities within the context of transgenerational trauma. “Fathering Masculinities: Like Father, Like Son? Transgenerational

Trauma and Intergenerational Masculinities in David Park's *Swallowing the Sun* and *The Light of Amsterdam*" employs the transgenerational paradigm of trauma as a heuristic with which to examine the literary depictions of father-son relationships in two of Park's novels. It analyses the central role fathers play in influencing their sons' own construction of masculinity, particularly in a traumatised society, where more than just masculinity can be transmitted generationally. Utilising contemporary theory, I postulate that "the father wound" defined by Castellini et al. is the gap, void or "emptiness within men [which] can be conceptualised as a lack of shared energy that can be trusted and relied upon, passing from father to son" (53). This wound may be "transmitted across generations" (Miller 197) and as such constitutes an inherently masculine form of transgenerational trauma. Whether the father wound is an emotional disconnect from a patriarchal father, or a result of violence, neglect or abuse, I demonstrate that the father wound has a profoundly detrimental impact on the intergenerational construction of masculinities. In this chapter I also establish that Park's *Swallowing the Sun* belongs within the genre of trauma fiction, that the thematic and structural repetition of the cyclical narrative builds along the trajectory of the abreactive trauma paradigm, only at the very climax to move beyond its deterministic confines to emulate the autonomy and agency at the heart of contemporary research into transgenerational trauma theory. In this way, Park liberates the narrative of the trauma novel from its essentialist and deterministic detractors and contemporises transgenerational trauma theory as a literary praxis.

Conversely, *The Light of Amsterdam*, published eight years later, constitutes an experiment of sorts, an attempt to write a genuinely post-conflict novel in which the Troubles are barely even alluded to and depicting a generation for whom the conflict appears to be irrelevant. However, I illustrate that trauma remains extremely pertinent in the novel. The difficult

relationship protagonist Alan is depicted as having with his father has overt parallels with Park's relationship with his own father, as iterated in his interview with Ian Sansom in *The Guardian*. In the narrative, Park highlights how the previous stoic and hegemonic ideals informing patriarchal masculinity have engendered a void between father and son and that often it is this void that may be passed on from father to son. Park's narrative also warns against the expectation that a child should emulate a parent's understanding of gendered identity or beliefs. While the end of the novel remains ambiguous Park depicts Alan's relationship with his son Jack as potentially positive, again highlighting the potential for the cycle of transgenerational trauma to be dynamic rather than constructed. The right attitude and resilience reinforces the idea that "you cannot heal your father, but you can let your child help you to heal yourself" (Pleck 223).

My final chapter, "Aging Masculinities: Not Just 'A Young Man's Game'— Gendering Gerontology in *Midwinter Break* and *The Truth Commissioner*", examines the subversive role ageing can play in destabilising the binary, hierarchical nature of the hegemonic paradigm. Not only is literary representation of the elderly scarce, so too is academic attention to this undertheorised area of both literary and masculinity studies. As Toni Calasanti notes in his seminal paper "Firming the Floppy Penis," "Studies of manhood neglect the old just as social gerontology avoids theorising masculinity"(3). Thus, this chapter is pioneering in its examination of ageing literary masculinities through the lens of gerontological theory, an illuminating counterpoint to my study of childhood masculinity as depicted in the *bildungsromane* discussed in the second chapter. I examine the depictions of ageing masculinities in these two novels in the context of physical embodiment, generativity versus stagnancy and sexuality and intimacy. Both novels portray ageing sexuality within the context of long-term relationships as potentially positive. Both Fenton in *The Truth Commissioner* and Gerry in *Midwinter Break* enjoy

wholesome, loving and affectionate sexual relations with their wives. I discuss how these depictions oppose traditional tropes, such as the ‘dirty old man’, emancipating and facilitating an expression of positive male sexuality that is in fact enabled by ageing rather than despite it. I argue that ageing male sexuality is a plural, open and exploratory sexuality, arguably similar to women’s sexuality, with more emphasis on intimacy and less on penetration. I show how these depictions of ageing masculinity express and inculcate new positive modalities of masculinity that deserve to be explored rather than ignored.

There is a thematic parallel between these two novels about ageing as the physical embodiment of cumulative trauma. Gilroy is depicted as frail and fragile, which triggers memories of physical vulnerability, as “He thinks, too, of the squeaking, brightly polished tow-capped boots of the squaddies as they give him a leathering ... a disorientating geography of pain” (*TTC* 79). So too is Stella’s trauma in *Midwinter Break* physically manifested in “the scar near her navel. Above the pale line of her C-section” (*Midwinter Break* 30). I also suggest that Gerry’s physical symptoms of alcoholism are representative of this trauma, from which he has not healed. While Fenton, the ex-RUC inspector in *The Truth Commissioner*, appears fit and healthy, the dislocated trauma of his past involvement in the Troubles, both in his own childlessness and his rejection of Connor Walshe, precipitates dangerous risk-taking behaviour. He continues to engage in the habits of his youth while ignoring the potential dangers of the physical reality of his age. As his wife remonstrates, she “didn’t survive thirty years of being a policeman’s wife only to be widowed by a mountain” (*TTC* 126).

All the protagonists in these novels depict alternative attitudes towards renegotiation of ageing gendered identity. In Park’s *The Truth Commissioner*, protagonists Fenton and Gilroy emulate dialectical attitudes towards ageing. Fenton’s positive and active attitude, I argue, is

emblematic of the continuous theory of ageing whereas Gilroy's is the fatalistic and pathologised embodiment of the discontinuous. Once again in Park's novel, we see evidence of the potential of the trauma of the Troubles to have a degenerative, stagnating impact on the protagonist's construction of masculinity. The respective parts played by each protagonist in the Troubles is strongly linked to how each man can successfully renegotiate an ageing masculine identity. Despite their diametrically opposed attitudes towards ageing, neither Gilroy nor Fenton is able to successfully balance generativity over the stagnancy in their own lives, having played key roles in the Troubles and in the death of Connor Walshe. Neither is able to come to terms with his own trauma and responsibilities in the Troubles and as the writing on wall states in the novel, it's "time to go" (*TTC* 349). Clearly, for David Park, these ageing masculinities are and should be dying out, anachronous as they are with a new post-conflict Northern Irish society.

MacLavery's Gerry is another matter entirely. Balanced at all times by his wife Stella's positive and adaptive approach to ageing, he fares better than Park's protagonists. While Gerry too has been unable to cope with the trauma of the past, he has the potential to renegotiate his identity and come to terms with his trauma with his wife at his side. Neither is representative of a wholly continuous nor discontinuous attitude towards ageing, but rather a mixture of the two compounded by his own trauma. While there are no guarantees, at the end of the novel, Gerry's masculinity is the most generative and has the most positive potential. Although flawed and traumatised, he may still be healed, and MacLavery suggests there is still a place in the world for men like Gerry. Gerry is emblematic of the many men traumatised by the Troubles who did not become violent like O'Reilly's protagonists, did not become embroiled in the politics or violence of the Trouble as did Fenton and Gilroy, but for whom masculine identity was founded on something dissociated from the prevailing hegemonic dictates. For those men whose



construction of masculine identity is distinct from the Troubles, there is unquestionably a future despite all they have lived through. Indeed, MacLaverty's depiction of ageing masculinity is an alternative expression of masculinity not often seen, a detailed representation of those who survived the Troubles but are not defined by them. I thus conclude that depictions of ageing masculinities in particular have a subversive and positive role to play in articulating and inculcating alternative masculinities.

While the remit of this thesis is to examine portrayals of masculinity specifically within the novel format, and by so doing highlight the important role fictional narratives play in iterating and explicating increasingly diverse masculinities, one may, of course, look beyond the novel to the depiction of masculinities across literary genres. My research, following on from the excellent scholarship initiated by Caroline Magennis, provides a springboard for the development of such literary studies. Expanding the scope to include poets and playwrights would allow for a move into the wider breadth of masculinities depicted in Northern Ireland and could in the future include study of work by a new, younger generation of writers from which much will undoubtedly be gleaned. Furthermore, as I highlighted in my second chapter, much work remains to be done on queer masculinities. Works such as Billy Cowan's *Smilin' Through*, a play depicting queer masculinities set during the Troubles, for example, are beginning to provide more diverse representations of queer masculinities.

The most obvious area for further research is, however, an analysis of the ways in which gender is depicted by female Northern Irish novelists. As mentioned in the introduction, the past two years have seen an explosion in novels published by women authors in the province. Anna Burns' Booker prize-winning novel *Milkman* has brought widespread attention both to the Northern Irish novel and to Northern Irish female novelists. Inquiry into depictions of gender

from a feminist theoretical perspective which takes account of the impact of trauma and transgenerational trauma and intergenerational femininities is an especially fecund area for exploration.

Given that literature frequently exists as a reflection of the dynamic and constantly evolving socio-cultural environment of which it is a product, the potential effects of the current political situation may have profound ramifications for constructions of identity in Northern Ireland. As this thesis has demonstrated, the peace process over the past 20 years has allowed for a greater understanding and more inclusive depictions of masculinity. These depictions have become increasingly less dependent upon and stratified along traditional ethnosectarian divides. However, the shadow of Brexit looms large, particularly in Northern Ireland. According to the BBC's referendum results, on 23 June 2016, the UK voted to leave the EU by a majority of 51.9%. In Northern Ireland, though, a majority of 55.8% voted to remain within the EU. This has caused a potential return to the tribal politics of the past. In an article for the *The Irish Times*, Simon Carswell suggests that despite the protestations to the contrary, for the pro-Brexit Democratic Unionist Party, the reinstatement of a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland as part of a 'hard Brexit' deal may be politically and electorally advantageous. Conversely, Sinn Féin believes that the wishes of the Northern Ireland majority should be respected and that the creation of such a border would not only be economically detrimental, but also a distinct contravention of the Good Friday Agreement. One may only speculate as to the effect the fallout from Brexit may wreak on Northern Ireland, but what is clear is that a return to this political binarism dredges up old political wounds and divisions. However, while didactic tradition is predicated towards closure, post-conflict literature represents a fluid and dynamic history that is still very much in the making and from which we can only continue to learn.

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